

# HORRORSTORY

*edited by*  
Karl Edward Wagner



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HORRORSTORY  
VOLUME FIVE



# HORRORSTORY

## VOLUME FIVE

THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES XIII  
THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES XIV  
THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES XV

Edited by  
Karl Edward Wagner

**UNDERWOOD-MILLER**  
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# HORRORSTORY VOLUME FIVE

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FIRST EDITION

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HORRORSTORY  
VOLUME FIVE



THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES

XIII





To Robert Bloch

*In shivering gratitude for fifty years of frights*



## INTRODUCTION

### 13 Is a Lucky Number

SO YOU SURVIVED 1984, did you? Now then, let's see if you can survive *The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series XIII*—presenting eighteen of the best horror stories published during 1984.

The *real* horror of 1984, at least for me, was in trying to limit my choices for this year's annual of the best horror fiction. Perhaps George Orwell meant to warn us that 1984 would be an outstanding year for horror fiction. *Series XIII* could easily have been twice the size of the present volume, and I had a few sleepless nights trying to decide which stories I would have to exclude because of space restrictions. Perhaps next year someone will write a horror story about *that*.

In any event, *The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series XIII* represents the best of the best from a Very Good Year. As usual, the stories were written by a mixture of Famous Names and of new and/or unfamiliar authors. Looking over the final line-up, I note that half of the writers have appeared in *The Year's Best Horror Stories* at least once before, while for the other half this is their first appearance. Sources of these stories range from genre magazines and anthologies to small press publications and chapbooks to literary magazines and women's/men's magazines. One story is from a convention program booklet, and another is from a comic book. The stories themselves run from quiet horror to the grisly. You'll find contemporary horror as well as traditional supernatural stories. There's science fiction alongside black humor and dark fantasy. These stories selected without regard to taboos, Big Names, or any particular subgenre of horror. I sifted through a year's output of short fiction to find stories that hold the power to chill the imagination—whether through icy terror or with a disquieting shiver. Here are the eighteen stories from 1984 that best succeeded in evoking a mood of horror.

Thirteen volumes is about the record for any best-of-the-year anthology series. Judith Merrill's outstanding best-of-the-year science fic-

tion/fantasy series lasted thirteen volumes (under various titles) from the 1950s up until the close of the 1960s. Donald Wollheim's year's-best science fiction series is the only other such series to last as long. This is the thirteenth volume of *The Year's Best Horror Stories*, begun by Sphere Books in England with Richard Davis as editor, reprinted by DAW Books in the United States and continued by DAW with Gerald W. Page as editor, and (when Page elected to devote more time to his own writing career) edited by me for the last half-dozen volumes. If you have all thirteen volumes of this series, then you have a good cross-section of the best in horror short fiction over the past decade-and-a-half. You will also have seen how young, unknown writers such as Stephen King, Ramsey Campbell, Dennis Etchison, or Charles L. Grant have developed into major forces in modern horror literature.

Stick with us. In another thirteen years some of the young, unknown writers whose work you're reading here will have become giants in the field.

The scariest is yet to come.

—*Karl Edward Wagner*

# Mrs. Todd's Shortcut

Stephen King

*Stephen King is generally considered to be the author who put horror fiction on the map. Certainly he is the author who put horror novels at the top of the bestseller charts, and subsequently made publishers think of horror fiction as something with a greater audience than a lunatic fringe of costumed sci-fi buffs. Beginning with Carrie, King has had a string of bestselling novels—'Salem's Lot, The Shining, The Stand, The Dead Zone, Firestarter, Cujo, Christine, Pet Sematary—many of which have been made into major films. King also excels as a writer of short fiction, as can be seen in his short story collections, Night Shift, Different Seasons, and the recent Skeleton Crew. Other recent books include The Talisman (with Peter Straub), Cycle of the Werewolf, The Eyes of the Dragon, and Thinner (writing as Richard Bachman).*

*Born September 21, 1947 in Portland, Maine, King has made frequent use of Down East backgrounds in his fiction. He and his wife, Tabitha (who also writes horror fiction), live with their children in a large Victorian house in Bangor. "Mrs. Todd's Shortcut" grew out of Tabitha's obsession with finding new shortcuts—and, yes, she does drive a Mercedes. For those who assume anything written by Stephen King is automatically published, three women's magazines rejected this story before Redbook accepted it. "Mrs. Todd's Shortcut" is one of King's finest pieces of writing, and is a further proof that King stands to become an important regionalist as well as horror writer.*

"THERE GOES THE Todd woman," I said.

Homer Buckland watched the little Jaguar go by and nodded. The woman raised her hand to Homer. Homer nodded his big, shaggy head to her but didn't raise his own hand in return. The Todd family had a big summer home on Castle Lake, and Homer had been their caretaker since time out of mind. I had an idea that he disliked Worth Todd's second wife every bit as much as he'd liked 'Phelia Todd, the first one.

This was just about two years ago and we were sitting on a bench in

front of Bell's Market, me with an orange soda-pop, Homer with a glass of mineral water. It was October, which is a peaceful time in Castle Rock. Lots of the lake places still get used on the weekends, but the aggressive, boozy summer socializing is over by then and the hunters with their big guns and their expensive nonresident permits pinned to their orange caps haven't started to come into town yet. Crops have been mostly laid by. Nights are cool, good for sleeping, and old joints like mine haven't yet started to complain. In October the sky over the lake is passing fair, with those big white clouds that move so slow; I like how they seem so flat on the bottoms, and how they are a little gray there, like with a shadow of sundown foretold, and I can watch the sun sparkle on the water and not be bored for some space of minutes. It's in October, sitting on the bench in front of Bell's and watching the lake from afar off, that I still wish I was a smoking man.

"She don't drive as fast as 'Phelia," Homer said. "I swan I used to think what an old-fashion name she had for a woman that could put a car through its paces like she could."

Summer people like the Todds are nowhere near as interesting to the year-round residents of small Maine towns as they themselves believe. Year-round folk prefer their own love stories and hate stories and scandals and rumors of scandal. When that textile fellow from Amesbury shot himself, Estonia Corbridge found that after a week or so she couldn't even get invited to lunch on her story of how she found him with the pistol still in one stiffening hand. But folks are still not done talking about Joe Camber, who got killed by his own dog.

Well, it don't matter. It's just that they are different race-courses we run on. Summer people are trotters; us others that don't put on ties to do our week's work are just pacers. Even so there was quite a lot of local interest when Ophelia Todd disappeared back in 1973. Ophelia was a genuinely nice woman, and she had done a lot of things in town. She worked to raise money for the Sloan Library, helped to refurbish the war memorial, and that sort of thing. But *all* the summer people like the idea of raising money. You mention raising money and their eyes light up and commence to gleam. You mention raising money and they can get a committee together and appoint a secretary and keep an agenda. They like that. But you mention *time* (beyond, that is, one big long walloper of a combined cocktail party and committee meeting) and you're out of luck. Time seems to be what summer people mostly set a store by. They lay it by, and if they could put it up in Ball jars like preserves, why, they would. But 'Phelia Todd seemed willing to *spend* time—to do desk duty in the library as well as to raise money for it. When it got down to using

scouring pads and elbow-grease on the war memorial, 'Phelia was right out there with town women who had lost sons in three different wars, wearing an overall with her hair done up in a kerchief. And when kids needed ferrying to a summer swim program, you'd be as apt to see her as anyone headed down Landing Road with the back of Worth Todd's big shiny pickup full of kids. A good woman. Not a town woman, but a good woman. And when she disappeared, there was concern. Not grieving, exactly, because a disappearance is not exactly like a death. It's not like chopping something off with a cleaver; more like something running down the sink so slow you don't know it's all gone until long after it is.

"'Twas a Mercedes she drove," Homer said, answering the question I hadn't asked. "Two-seater sportster. Todd got it for her in sixty-four or sixty-five, I guess. You remember her taking the kids to the lake all those years they had Frogs and Tadpoles?"

"Ayuh."

"She'd drive em no more than forty, mindful they was in the back. But it chafed her. That woman had lead in her foot and a ball bearing sommers in the back of her ankle."

It used to be that Homer never talked about his summer people. But then his wife died. Five years ago it was. She was plowing a grade and the tractor tipped over on her and Homer was taken bad off about it. He grieved for two years or so and then seemed to feel better. But he was not the same. He seemed waiting for something to happen, waiting for the next thing. You'd pass his neat little house sometimes at dusk and he would be on the porch smoking a pipe with a glass of mineral water on the porch rail and the sunset would be in his eyes and pipe smoke around his head and you'd think—I did, anyway—*Homer is waiting for the next thing*. This bothered me over a wider range of my mind than I liked to admit, and at last I decided it was because if it had been me, I wouldn't have been waiting for the next thing, like a groom who has put on his morning coat and finally has his tie right and is only sitting there on a bed in the upstairs of his house and looking first at himself in the mirror and then at the clock on the mantel and waiting for it to be eleven o'clock so he can get married. If it had been me, I would not have been waiting for the next thing; I would have been waiting for the last thing.

But in that waiting period—which ended when Homer went to Vermont a year later—he sometimes talked about those people. To me, to a few others.

"She never even drove fast with her husband, s'far as I know. But when I drove with her, she made that Mercedes strut."



A fellow pulled in at the pumps and began to fill up his car. The car had a Massachusetts plate.

"It wasn't one of these new sports cars that run on unleaded gasoline and hitch every time you step on it; it was one of the old ones, and the speedometer was calibrated all the way up to a hundred and sixty. It was a funny color of brown and I ast her one time what you called that color and she said it was champagne. Ain't that *good*, I says, and she laughs fit to split. I like a woman who will laugh when you don't have to point her right at the joke, you know."

The man at the pumps had finished getting his gas.

"Afternoon, gentlemen," he says as he comes up the steps.

"A good day to you," I says, and he went inside.

"Phelia was always looking for a shortcut," Homer went on as if we had never been interrupted. "That woman was mad for a shortcut. I never saw the beat of it. She said if you can save enough distance, you'll save time as well. She said her father swore by that scripture. He was a salesman, always on the road, and she went with him when she could, and he was always lookin for the shortest way. So she got in the habit.

"I ast her one time if it wasn't kinda funny—here she was on the one hand, spendin her time rubbin up that old statue in the Square and takin the little ones to their swimmin lessons instead of playing tennis and swimming and getting boozed up like normal summer people, and on the other hand bein so damn set on savin fifteen minutes between here and Fryeburg that thinkin about it probably kep her up nights. It just seemed to me the two things went against each other's grain, if you see what I mean. She just looks at me and says, 'I like being helpful, Homer. I like driving, too—at least sometimes, when it's a challenge—but I don't like the *time* it takes. It's mending clothes—sometimes you take tucks and sometimes you let things out. Do you see what I mean?'"

"'I guess so, missus,' I says, kinda dubious.

"'If sitting behind the wheel of a car was my idea of a really good time *all* the time, I would look for long-cuts,' she says, and that tickled me s'much I had to laugh."

The Massachusetts fellow came out of the store with a six-pack in one hand and some lottery tickets in the other.

"You enjoy your weekend," Homer says.

"I always do," the Massachusetts fellow says. "I only wish I could afford to live here all year round."

"Well, we'll keep it all in good order for when you *can* come," Homer says, and the fellow laughs.

We watched him drive off toward someplace, that Massachusetts plate

showing. It was a green one. My Marcy says those are the ones the Massachusetts Motor Registry gives to drivers who ain't had a accident in that strange, angry, fuming state for two years. If you have, she says, you got to have a red one so people know to watch out for you when they see you on the roll.

"They was in-state people, you know, the both of them," Homer said, as if the Massachusetts fellow had reminded him of the fact.

"I guess I did know that," I said.

"The Todds are just about the only birds we got that fly north in the winter. The new one, I don't think she likes flying north too much."

He sipped his mineral water and fell silent a moment, thinking.

"*She* didn't mind it, though," Homer said. "At least, I *judge* she didn't although she used to complain about it something fierce. The complaining was just a way to explain why she was always lookin for a shortcut."

"And you mean her husband didn't mind her traipsing down every wood-road in tarnation between here and Bangor just so she could see if it was nine-tenths of a mile shorter?"

"He didn't care piss-all," Homer said shortly, and got up, and went in the store. There now, Owens, I told myself, you know it ain't safe to ast him questions when he's yarning, and you went right ahead and ast one, and you have bugged a story that was starting to shape up promising.

I sat there and turned my face up into the sun and after about ten minutes he came out with a boiled egg and sat down. He ate her and I took care not to say nothing and the water on Castle Lake sparkled as blue as something as might be told of in a story about treasure. When Homer had finished his egg and had a sip of mineral water, he went on. I was surprised, but still said nothing. It wouldn't have been wise.

"They had two or three different chunks of rolling iron," he said. "There was the Cadillac, and his truck, and her little Mercedes go-devil. A couple of winters he left the truck, 'case they wanted to come down and do some skiin. Mostly when the summer was over he'd drive the Caddy back up and she'd take her go-devil."

I nodded but didn't speak. In truth, I was afraid to risk another comment. Later I thought it would have taken a lot of comments to shut Homer Buckland up that day. He had been wanting to tell the story of Mrs. Todd's shortcut for a long time.

"Her little go-devil had a special odometer in it that told you how many miles was in a trip, and every time she set off from Castle Lake to Bangor she'd set it 000-point-0 and let her clock up to whatever. She had made a game of it, and she used to chafe me with it."

He paused, thinking that back over.

“No, that ain’t right.”

He paused more and faint lines showed up on his forehead like steps on a library ladder.

“She *made* like she made a game of it, but it was a serious business to her. Serious as anything else, anyway.” He flapped a hand and I think he meant the husband. “The glovebox of the little go-devil was filled with maps, and there was a few more in the back where there would be a seat in a regular car. Some was gas station maps, and some was pages that had been pulled from the Rand-McNally Road Atlas; she had some maps from Appalachian Trail guidebooks and a whole mess of topographical survey-squares, too. It wasn’t her having those maps that made me think it wa’n’t a game; it was how she’d drawn lines on all of them, showing routes she’d taken or at least tried to take.

“She’d been stuck a few times, too, and had to get a pull from some farmer with a tractor and chain.

“I was there one day laying tile in the bathroom, sitting there with grout squittering out of every damn crack you could see—I dreamed of nothing but squares and cracks that was bleeding grout that night—and she come stood in the doorway and talked to me about it for quite a while. I used to chafe her about it, but I was also sort of interested, and not just because my brother Franklin used to live down-Bangor and I’d traveled most of the roads she was telling me of. I was interested just because a man like me is always uncommon interested in knowing the shortest way, even if he don’t always want to take it. You that way too?”

“Ayuh,” I said. There’s something powerful about knowing the shortest way, even if you take the longer way because you know your mother-in-law is sitting home. Getting there quick is often for the birds, although no one holding a Massachusetts driver’s license seems to know it. But *knowing* how to get there quick—or even knowing how to get there a way that the person sitting beside you don’t know . . . that has power.

“Well, she had them roads like a Boy Scout has his knots,” Homer said, and smiled his large, sunny grin. “She says, ‘Wait a minute, wait a minute,’ like a little girl, and I hear her through the wall rummaging through her desk, and then she comes back with a little notebook that looked like she’d had it a good long time. Cover was all rumpled, don’t you know, and some of the pages had pulled loose from those little wire rings on one side.

“The way Worth goes—the way *most* people go—is Route 97 to Mechanic Falls, then Route 11 to Lewiston, and then the Interstate to Bangor. 156.4 miles.”

I nodded.

“‘If you want to skip the turnpike—and save some distance—you’d go to Mechanic Falls, Route 11 to Lewiston, Route 202 to Augusta, then up Route 9 through China Lake and Unity and Haven to Bangor. That’s 144.9 miles.’

“‘You won’t save no time that way, missus,’ I says, ‘not going through Lewiston *and* Augusta. Although I will admit that drive up the Old Derry Road to Bangor is real pretty.’

“‘Save enough miles and soon enough you’ll save time,’ she says. ‘And I didn’t say that’s the way I’d go, although I have a good many times; I’m just running down the routes most people use. Do you want me to go on?’

“‘No,’ I says, ‘just leave me in this cussed bathroom all by myself starin at all these cussed cracks until I start to rave.’

“‘There are four major routes in all,’ she says. ‘The one by Route 2 is 163.4 miles. I only tried it once. Too long.’

“‘That’s the one I’d hosey if my wife called and told me it was leftovers,’ I says, kinda low.

“‘What was that?’ she says.

“‘Nothin,’ I says, ‘Talkin to the grout.’

“‘Oh. Well, the fourth—and there aren’t too many who know about it, although they are all good roads—paved, anyway, is across Speckled Bird Mountain on 219 to 202 *beyond* Lewiston. Then, if you take Route 19, you can get around Augusta. Then you take the Old Derry Road. That way is just 129.2.’

“‘I didn’t say nothing for a little while and p’raps she thought I was doubting her because she says, a little pert, ‘I know it’s hard to believe, but it’s so.’

“‘I said I guessed that was about right, and I thought—looking back—it probably was. Because that’s the way I’d usually go when I went down to Bangor to see Franklin when he was still alive. I hadn’t been that way in years, though. Do you think a man could just—well—forget a road, Dave?’”

I allowed it was possible. The turnpike is easy to think of. After a while it almost fills a man’s mind, and you think not how could I get from here to there but how can I get from here to the turnpike ramp that’s *closest* to there. And that made me think that maybe there are lots of roads all over that are just going begging; roads with rock walls beside them, real roads with blackberry bushes growing alongside them but nobody to eat the berries but the birds and gravel pits with old rusted chains hanging down in low curve in front of their entryways, the pits themselves as forgotten as a child’s old toys with scumgrass growing up their deserted

unremembered sides. Roads that have just been forgot except by the people who live on them and think of the quickest way to get off them and onto the turnpike where you can pass on a hill and not fret over it. We like to joke in Maine that you can't get there from here, but maybe the joke is on us. The truth is there's about a damn thousand ways to do it and man doesn't bother.

Homer continued: "I grouted tile all afternoon in that hot little bathroom and she stood there in the doorway all that time, one foot crossed behind the other, bare-legged, wearin loafers and a khaki-colored skirt and a sweater that was some darker. Hair was drawed back in a hosstail. She must have been thirty-four or -five then, but her face was lit up with what she was tellin me and I swan she looked like a sorority girl home from school on vacation.

"After a while she musta got an idea of how long she'd been there cuttin the air around her mouth because she says, 'I must be boring the hell out of you, Homer.'

"'Yes'm,' I says, 'you are. I druther you went away and left me to talk to this damn grout.'

"'Don't be sma'at, Homer,' she says.

"'No, missus, you ain't borin me,' I says.

"So she smiles and then goes back to it, pagin through her little notebook like a salesman checkin his orders. She had those four main ways—well, really three because she gave up on Route 2 right away—but she must have had forty different other ways that were play-offs on those. Roads with state numbers, roads without, roads with names, roads without. My head fair spun with em. And finally she says to me, 'You ready for the blue ribbon winner, Homer?'

"'I guess so,' I says.

"'At least it's the blue ribbon winner *so far*,' she says. 'Do you know, Homer, that a man wrote an article in *Science Today* in 1921 proving that no man could run a mile in under four minutes? He *proved* it, with all sorts of calculations based on the maximum length of the male thigh-muscles, maximum length of stride, maximum lung capacity, maximum heart-rate, and a whole lot more. I was *taken* with that article! I was so taken that I gave it to Worth and asked him to give it to Professor Murray in the math department at the University of Maine. I wanted those figures checked because I was sure they must have been based on the wrong postulates, or something. Worth probably thought I was being silly—"Ophelia's got a bee in her bonnet" is what he says—but he took them. Well, Professor Murray checked through the man's figures quite carefully . . . and do you know *what*, Homer?'

"'No, missus.'

"'Those figures were *right*. The man's criteria were *solid*. He proved, back in 1923, that a man couldn't run a mile in under four minutes. He *proved* that. But people do it all the time, and do you know that that means?'

"'No, missus,' I said, although I had a glimmer.

"'It means that no blue ribbon is forever,' she says. 'Someday—if the world doesn't explode itself in the meantime—someone will run a *two-minute* mile in the Olympics. It may take a hundred years or a thousand, but it will happen. Because there is no ultimate blue ribbon. There is zero, and there is eternity, and there is mortality, but there is no *ultimate*.'

"'And there she stood, her face clean and scrubbed and shinin, that darkish hair of hers pulled back from her brow, as if to say 'Just you go ahead and disagree if you can.' But I couldn't. Because I believe something like that. It is much like what the minister means, I think, when he talks about grace.

"'You ready for the blue-ribbon winner *for now*?' she says.

"'Ayuh,' I says, and I even stopped groutin for the time bein. I'd reached the tub anyway and there wasn't nothing left but a lot of those frikkin squirrelly little corners. She drewed a deep breath and then spied it out at me as fast as that auctioneer goes over in Gates Falls when he has been putting the whiskey to himself, and I can't remember it all, but it went something like this."

Homer Buckland shut his eyes for a moment, his big hands lying perfectly still on his long thighs, his face turned up toward the sun. Then he opened his eyes again and for a moment I swan he *looked* like her, yes he did, a seventy-year-old man looking like a woman of thirty-four who was at that moment in her time looking like a college girl of twenty, and I can't remember exactly what *he* said any more than *he* could remember exactly what *she* said, not just because it was complex but because I was so fetched by how he looked sayin it, but it went close enough like this:

"'You set out Route 97 and then cut up Denton Street to the Old Townhouse Road and that way you get around Castle Rock downtown but back to 97. Nine miles up you can go an old logger's road a mile and a half to Town Road #6, which takes you to Big Anderson Road by Sites' Cedar Mill. There's a cut-road the old-timers call Bear Road, and that gets you to 219. Once you're on the far side of Speckled Bird Mountain you grab the Stanhouse Road, turn left onto the Bull Pine Road—there's a swampy patch there but you can spang right through it if you get up

enough speed on the gravel—and so you come out on Route 106. 106 cuts through Alton's Plantation to the Old Derry Road—and there's two or three woods roads there that you follow and so come out on Route 3 just beyond Derry Hospital. From there it's only four miles to Route 2 in Etna, and so into Bangor.'

"She paused to get her breath back, then looked at me. 'Do you know how long that is, all told?'

"'No'm' I says, thinking it sounds like about a hundred and ninety miles and four bust springs.

"'It's 116.4 miles,' she says."

I laughed. The laugh was out of me before I thought I wasn't doing myself any favor if I wanted to hear this story to the end. But Homer grinned himself and nodded.

"I know. And *you* know I don't like to argue with anyone, Dave. But there's a difference between having your leg pulled and getting it shook like a damn apple-tree.

"'You don't believe me,' she says.

"'Well, it's *hard* to believe, missus,' I said.

"'Leave that grout to dry and I'll show you,' she says. "You can finish behind the tub tomorrow. Come on, Homer. I'll leave a note for Worth—he may not be back tonight anyway—and you can call your wife! We'll be sitting down to dinner in the Pilot's Grille in'—she looks at her watch—'two hours and forty-five minutes from right now. And if it's a minute longer, I'll buy you a bottle of Irish Mist to take home with you. You see, my dad was right. Save enough miles and you'll save time, even if you have to go through every damn bog and sump in Kennebec County to do it. Now what do you say?'

"She was lookin at me with her brown eyes just like lamps, there was a devilish look in them that said turn your cap around back'rds, Homer, and climb aboard this hoss, I be first and you be second and let the devil take the hindmost, and there was a grin on her face that said the exact same thing, and I tell you, Dave, I wanted to go. I didn't even want to top that damn can of grout. And I *certain* sure didn't want to drive that go-devil of hers. I wanted just to sit in it on the shotgun side and watch her get in, see her skirt come up a little, see her pull it down over her knees or not, watch her hair shine."

He trailed off and suddenly let off a sarcastic, choked laugh. That laugh of his sounded like a shotgun loaded with rock salt.

"Just call up Megan and say, 'You know 'Phelia Todd, that woman you're halfway to being so jealous of now you can't see straight and can't ever find a good word to say about her? Well, her and me is going to

make this speed-run down to Bangor in that little champagne-colored she-devil Mercedes of hers, so don't wait dinner.'

"Just call her up and say that. Oh *yes*. Oh *ayuh*."

And he laughed again with his hands lying there on his legs just as natural as ever was and I seen something in his face that was almost hateful and after a minute he took his glass of mineral water from the railing there and got outside some of it.

"You didn't go," I said.

"Not *then*."

He laughed, and this laugh was gentler.

"She must have seen something in my face, because it was like she found herself again. She stopped looking like a sorority girl and just looked like 'Phelia Todd again. She looked down at the notebook like she didn't know what it was she had been holding and put it down by her side, almost behind her skirt.

"I says, 'I'd like to do just that thing, missus, but I got to finish up here, and my wife has got a roast on for dinner.'

"She says, 'I understand, Homer—I just got a little carried away. I do that a lot. All the time, Worth says.' Then she kinda straightened up and says, 'But the offer holds, any time you want to go. You can even throw your shoulder to the back end if we get stuck somewhere. Might save me five dollars.' And she laughed.

"I'll take you up on it, missus,' I says, and she seen that I meant what I said and wasn't just being polite.

"'And before you just go believing that a hundred and sixteen miles to Bangor is out of the question, get out your own map and see how many miles it would be as the crow flies.'

"I finished the tiles and went home and ate leftovers—there wa'n't no roast, and I think 'Phelia Todd knew it—and after Megan was in bed, I got out my yardstick and a pen and my Mobil map of the state, and I did what she had told me . . . because it had laid hold of my mind a bit, you see. I drew a straight line and did out the calculations accordin to the scale of miles. I was some surprised. Because if you went from Castle Rock up there to Bangor like one of those little Piper Cubs could fly on a clear day—if you didn't have to mind lakes, or stretches of lumber company woods that was chained off, or bogs, or crossing rivers where there wasn't no bridges, why, it would just be seventy-nine miles, give or take."

I jumped a little.

"Measure it yourself, if you don't believe me," Homer said. "I never knew Maine was so small until I seen that."



He had himself a drink, and then looked around at me.

“There come a time the next spring when Megan was away in New Hampshire visiting her brother. I had to go down to the Todds’ house to take off the storm doors and put on the screens, and her little Mercedes go-devil was there. She was down by herself.

“She come to the door and says: ‘Homer! Have you come to put on the screen doors?’

“And right off I says: ‘No, missus, I come to see if you want to give me a ride down to Bangor the short way.’

“Well, she looked at me with no expression on her face at all, and I thought she had forgotten all about it. I felt my face gettin red, the way it will when you feel you just pulled one hell of a boner. Then, just when I was getting ready to pologize, her face busts into that grin again and she says, ‘You just stand right there while I get my keys. And don’t change your mind, Homer!’ ”

“She come back a minute later with em in her hand. ‘If we get stuck, you’ll see mosquitoes just about the size of dragonflies.’

“‘I’ve seen em as big as English sparrows up in Rangely, missus,’ I said, ‘and I guess we’re both a spot too heavy to be carried off.’

“She laughs. ‘Well, I warned you, anyway. Come on, Homer.’

“‘And if we ain’t there in two hours and forty-five minutes,’ I says, kinda sly, ‘you was gonna buy me a bottle of Irish Mist.’

“She looks at me kinda surprised, the driver’s door of the go-devil open and one foot inside. ‘Hell, Homer,’ she says, ‘I told you that was the Blue Ribbon for *then*. I’ve found a way up there that’s *shorter*. We’ll be there in two and a half hours. Get in, Homer. We are going to roll.’ ”

He paused again, hands lying calm on his thighs, his eyes dulling, perhaps seeing that champagne-colored two-seater heading up the Todds’ steep driveway.

“She stood the car still at the end of it and says, ‘You sure?’

“‘Let her rip,’ I says. The ball bearing in her ankle rolled and that heavy foot come down. I can’t tell you nothing much about whatall happened after that. Except after a while I couldn’t hardly take my eyes off her. There was somethin wild that crep into her face, Dave—somethin *wild* and something *free*, and it frightened my heart. She was beautiful, and I was took with love *for* her, anyone would have been, any man, anyway, and maybe any woman too, but I was scairt *of* her too, because she looked like she could kill you if her eye left the road and fell on you and she decided to love you back. She was wearin blue jeans and a old white shirt with the sleeves rolled up—I had a idea she was maybe fixin to paint somethin on the back deck when I came by—but after we had been goin

for a while seemed like was was dressed in nothin but all this white billowy stuff like a pitcher in one of those old gods-and-goddesses books.”

He thought, looking out across the lake, his face very somber.

“Like the huntress that was supposed to drive the moon across the sky.”

“Diana?”

“Ayuh. Moon was her go-devil. ’Phelia looked like that to me and I just tell you fair out that I was stricken in love for her and never would have made a move, even though I was some younger then than I am now. I would not have made a move even had I been twenty, although I suppose I might of at sixteen, and been killed for it—killed if she looked at me was the way it felt.

“She was like that woman drivin the moon across the sky, halfway up over the splashboard with gossamer stoles all flyin out behind her in silver cobwebs and her hair streamin back to show the dark little hollows of her temples, lashin those horses and tellin me to get along faster and never mind how they blowed, just faster, faster, *faster*.

“We went down a lot of woods roads—the first two or three I knew, and after that I didn’t know none of them. We must have been a sight to those trees that had never seen nothing with a motor in it before but big old pulp-trucks and snowmobiles; that little go-devil that would most likely have looked more at home on the Sunset Boulevard than shooting through those woods, spitting and bulling its way up one hill and then slamming down the next through those dusty green bars of afternoon sunlight—she had the top down and I could smell everything in those woods, and you know what an old fine smell that is, like something which has been mostly left alone and is not much troubled. We went on across corduroy which had been laid over some of the boggiest parts, and black sand squelched up between some of those cut logs and she laughed like a kid. Some of the logs was old and rotted, because there hadn’t been nobody down a couple of those roads—except for her, that is—in I’m going to say five or ten years. We was *alone*, except for the birds and whatever animals seen us. The sound of that go-devil’s engine, first buzzin along and then windin up high and fierce when she punched in the clutch and shifted down . . . that was the only motor-sound I could hear. And although I knew we had to be close to *someplace* all the time—I mean, these days you always are—I started to feel like we had gone back in time, and there wasn’t *nothing*. That if we stopped and I climbed a high tree, I wouldn’t see nothing in any direction but woods and woods and more woods. And all the time she’s just *hammering* that thing along, her hair all out behind her, smilin, her eyes flashin. So we come out on

the Speckled Bird Mountain Road and for a while I know where we were again, and then she turned off and for just a little bit I *thought* I knew, and then I didn't even bother to kid myself no more. We went cut-slam down another woods road, and then we come out—I swear it—on a nice paved road with a sign that said MOTORWAYB. You ever heard of a road in the state of Maine that was called MOTORWAYB?”

“No,” I says. “Sounds English.”

“Ayuh. *Looked* English. These trees like willows overhung the road. ‘Now watch out here, Homer,’ she says, ‘one of those nearly grabbed me a month ago and gave me an Indian burn.’

“I didn't know what she was talkin about and started to say so, and then I seen that even though there was no wind, the branches of those trees was dippin down—they was *waverin* down. They looked black and wet inside the fuzz of green on them. I couldn't believe what I was seein. Then one of em snatched off my cap and I knew I wasn't asleep. ‘Hi!’ I shouts, ‘Give that back!’

“‘Too late now, Homer,’ she says, and laughs. ‘There's daylight, just up ahead . . . we're okay.’

“Then another one of 'em comes down, on her side this time, and snatches at her—I swear it did. She ducked, and it caught in her hair and pulled a lock of it out. ‘Ouch, dammit that *hurts!*’ she yells, but she was laughin, too. The car swerved a little when she ducked and I got a look into the woods and holy God, Dave! *Everythin* in there was movin. There was grass wavin and plants that was all knotted together so it seemed like they made faces, and I seen somethin sittin in a squat on top of a stump, and it looked like tree-toad, only it was as big as a full-growed cat.

“Then we come out of the shade to the top of a hill and she says, ‘There! That was exciting, wasn't it?’ as if she was talkin about no more than a walk through the Haunted House at the Fryeburg Fair.

“About five minutes later we swung onto another of her woods roads. I didn't want no more woods right then—I can tell you that for sure—but these were just plain old woods. Half an hour after that, we was pulling into the parking lot of the Pilot's Grille in Bangor. She points to that little odometer for trips and says, ‘Take a gander, Homer.’ I did, and it said 111.6. ‘What do you think now? Do you believe in my shortcut?’

“That wild look had mostly faded out of her, and she was just 'Phelia Todd again. But that other look wasn't entirely gone. It was like she was two women, 'Phelia and Diana, and the part of her that was Diana was so much in control when she was driving the back roads that the part that was 'Phelia didn't have no idea that her shortcut was taking her

through places . . . places that ain't on any map of Maine, not even on those survey-squares.

"She says again, 'What do you think of my shortcut, Homer?'

"And I says the first thing to come into my mind, which ain't something you'd usually say to a lady like 'Phelia Todd. 'It's a real pill-cutter, missus,' I says.

"She laughs, just as pleased as punch, and I seen it then, just as clear as glass: She didn't remember none of the funny stuff. Not the willow-branches—except they weren't willows, not at all, not anything like em, or anything else—that grabbed off m'hat, not that MOTORWAY B sign, or that awful-lookin toad-thing. *She didn't remember none of that funny stuff!* Either I had dreamed it was there or she had dreamed it wasn't. All I knew for sure, Dave, was that we had rolled only a hundred and eleven miles and gotten to Bangor, and that wasn't no daydream; it was right there on the little go-devil's odometer, in black and white.

"'Well, it is,' she says. 'It is a piss-cutter. I only wish I could get Worth to give it a go sometime . . . but he'll never get out of his rut unless someone blasts him out of it, and it would probably take a Titan II missile to do that, because I believe he has built himself a fallout shelter at the bottom of that rut. Come on in, Homer, and let's dump some dinner into you.'

"And she bought me one hell of a dinner, Dave, but I couldn't eat very much of it. I kep thinkin about what the ride back might be like, now that it was drawing down dark. Then, about halfway through the meal, she excused herself and made a telephone call. When she came back she ast me if I would mind drivin the go-devil back to Castle Rock for her. She said she had talked to some woman who was on the same school committee as her, and the woman said they had some kind of problem about somethin or other. She said she'd grab herself a Hertz car if Worth couldn't see her back down. 'Do you mind awfully driving back in the dark?' she ast me.

"She looked at me, kinda smilin, and I knew she remembered *some* of it all right—Christ knows how much, but she remembered enough to know I wouldn't want to try her way after dark, if ever at all . . . although I seen by the light in her eyes that it wouldn't have bothered her a bit.

"So I said it wouldn't bother me, and I finished my meal better than when I started it. It was drawin down dark by the time we was done, and she run us over to the house of the woman she'd called. And when she gets out she looks at me with that same light in her eyes and says, 'Now, you're *sure* you don't want to wait, Homer? I saw a couple of side roads

just today, and although I can't find them on my maps, I think they might chop a few miles.'

"I says, 'Well, missus, I would, but at my age the best bed to sleep in is my own, I've found. I'll take your car back and never put a ding in her . . . although I guess I'll probably put on some more miles than you did.'

"Then she laughed, kind of soft, and she give me a kiss. That was the best kiss I ever had in my whole life, Dave. It was just on the cheek, and it was the chaste kiss of a married woman, but it was as ripe as a peach, or like those flowers that open in the dark, and when her lips touched my skin I felt like . . . I don't know exactly what I felt like, because a man can't easily hold on to those things that happened to him with a girl who was ripe when the world was young or how those things felt—I'm talking around what I mean, but I think you understand. Those things all get a red cast to them in your memory and you cannot see through it at all.

"'You're a sweet man, Homer, and I love you for listening to me and riding with me,' she says. 'Drive safe.'

"Then in she went, to that woman's house. Me, I drove home."

"How did you go?" I asked.

He laughed softly. "By the turnpike, you damned fool," he said, and I never seen so many wrinkles in his face before as I did then.

He sat there, looking into the sky.

"Came the summer she disappeared. I didn't see much of her . . . that was the summer we had the fire, you'll remember, and then the big storm that knocked down all the trees. A busy time for caretakers. Oh, I *thought* about her from time to time, and about that day, and about that kiss, and it started to seem like a dream to me. Like one time, when I was out plowing George Bascomb's west field, the one that looks acrost the lake at the mountains, dreamin about what teenage boys dream of. And I pulled up this rock with the harrow blades, and it split open, and it *bled*. At least, it looked to me like it bled. Red stuff come runnin out of the cleft in the rock and soaked into the soil. And I never told no one but my mother, and I never told her what it meant to me, or what happened to me, although she washed my drawers and maybe she knew. Anyway, she suggested I ought to pray on it. Which I did, but I never got no enlightenment, and after a while something started to suggest to my mind that it had been a dream. It's that way, sometimes. There is holes in the *middle*, Dave. Do you know that?"

"Yes," I says, thinking of one night when I'd seen something. That was in '59, a bad year for us, but my kids didn't know it was a bad year; all they knew was that they wanted to eat just like always. I'd seen a bunch of whitetail in Henry Brugger's back field, and I was out there after dark

with a jacklight in August. You can shoot two when they're summer-fat; the second'll come back and sniff at the first as if to say *What the hell? Is it fall already?* and you can pop him like a bowlin pin. You can hack off enough meat to feed yowwens for six weeks and bury what's left. Those are two whitetails the hunters who come in November don't get a shot at, but kids have to eat. Like the man from Massachusetts said, *he'd* like to be able to afford to live here the year around, and all I can say is sometimes you pay for the privilege after dark. So there I was, and I seen this big orange light in the sky; it comes down and down, and I stood and watched it with my mouth hung on down to my breastbone and when it hit the lake the whole of it was lit up for a minute a purple-orange that seemed to go right up to the sky in rays. Wasn't nobody ever said nothing to me about that light, and I never said nothing to nobody myself, partly because I was afraid they'd laugh, but also because they'd wonder what the hell I'd been doing out there after dark to start with. And after a while it was like Homer said—it seemed like a dream I had once had, and it didn't signify to me because I couldn't make nothing of it which would turn under my hand. It was like a moonbeam. It didn't have no handle and it didn't have no blade. I couldn't make it work so I left it alone, like a man does when he knows the day is going to come up nevertheless.

"There are *holes* in the middle of things," Homer said, and he sat up straighter, like he was mad. "Right in the damn *middle* of things, not even to the left or right where your p'riph'ral vision is and you could say, 'Well, but hell—' They are there and you go around them like you'd go around a pothole in the road that would break an axle. You know? And you forget it. Or like if you are plowin, you can plow a dip. But if there's somethin like a *break* in the earth, where you see darkness, like a cave might be there, you say 'Go around, old hoss. Leave that alone! I got a good shot over here to the left'ards.' Because it wasn't a cave you was lookin for, or some kind of college excitement, but good plowin.

"*Holes* in the *middle* of things."

He fell still a long time then and I let him be still. Didn't have no urge to move him. And at last he says:

"She disappeared in August. I seen her for the first time in early July, and she looked . . . "Homer turned to me and spoke each word with careful spaced emphasis. "Dave Owens, she looked *gorgeous!* Gorgeous and wild and almost untamed. The little wrinkles I'd started to notice around her eyes all seemed to be gone. Worth Todd, he was at some conference or something in Boston. And she stands there at the edge of

the deck—I was out in the middle with my shirt off—and she says ‘Homer, you’ll never believe it.’

“‘No, missus, but I’ll try,’ I says.

“‘I found two new roads,’ she says, ‘and I got to Bangor this last time in just sixty-seven miles.’

“I remembered what she said before and I says, ‘That’s not possible, missus. Beggin your pardon, but I did the mileage on the map myself, and seventy-nine is tops . . . as the crow flies.’

“She laughed, and she looked prettier than ever. Like a goddess in the sun, on one of those hills in a story where there’s nothing but green grass and fountains and no puckies to tear at a man’s forearms at all. ‘That’s right,’ she says, ‘and you can’t run a mile in under four minutes. It’s been mathematically *proved*.’

“‘It ain’t the same,’ I says.

“‘It’s the same,’ she says. ‘Fold the map and see how many miles it is then, Homer. It can be a little less than a straight line if you fold it a little, or it can be a lot less if you fold it a lot.’

“I remembered our ride then, the way you remember a dream, and I says, ‘Missus, you can fold a map on paper but you can’t fold *land*. Or at least you shouldn’t ought to try. You want to leave it alone.’

“‘No, sir,’ she says. ‘It’s the one thing right now in my life that I won’t leave alone, because it’s *there*, and it’s *mine*.’

“Three weeks later—this would be about two weeks before she disappeared—she give me a call from Bangor. She says, ‘Worth has gone to New York, and I am coming down. I’ve misplaced my damn key, Homer. I’d like you to open the house so I can get in.’

“Well, that call come at eight o’clock, just when it was starting to come down dark. I had a sanwidge and a beer before leaving—about twenty minutes. Then I took a ride down there. All in all, I’d say I was forty-five minutes. When I got down there to the Todds’, I seen there was a light on in the pantry I didn’t leave on while I was comin down the driveway. I was lookin at that, and I almost run right into her little go-devil. It was parked kind of on a slant, the way a drunk would park it, and it was splashed with muck all the way up to the windows, and there was this stuff stuck in that mud along the body that looked like seaweed . . . only when my lights hit it, it seemed to be *movin*. I parked behind it and got out of my truck. That stuff wasn’t seaweed, but it *was* weeds, and it *was* movin . . . kinda slow and sluggish, like it was dyin. I touched a piece of it, and it tried to wrap itself around my hand. It felt nasty and awful. I drug my hand away and wiped it on my pants. I went around to the front of the car. It looked like it had come through about ninety miles of splash

and low country. Looked *tired*, it did. Bugs was splashed all over the windshield—only they didn't look like no kind of bugs *I* ever seen before. There was a moth that was about the size of a sparrow, its wings still flappin a little, feeble and dyin. There were things like mosquitoes, only they had real eyes that you could see—and they seemed to be seein *me*. I could hear those weeds scrapin against the body of the go-devil, dyin, tryin to get a hold on somethin. And all I could think was Where in the hell has she been? And how did she get here in only three-quarters of an hour? Then I seen somethin else. There was some kind of a animal half-smashed onto the radiator grille, just under where that Mercedes ornament is—the one that looks kinda like a star looped up into a circle? Now most small animals you kill on the road is bore right under the car, because they are crouching when it hits them, hoping it'll just go over and leave them with their hide still attached to their meat. But every now and then one will jump, not away, but right at the damn car, as if to get in one good bite of whatever the buggardly thing is that's going to kill it—I have known that to happen. This thing had maybe done that. And it looked mean enough to jump a Sherman tank. It looked like something which come of a mating between a woodchuck and weasel, but there was other stuff thrown in that a body didn't even want to look at. It hurt your eyes, Dave; worse'n that, it hurt your *mind*. Its pelt was matted with blood, and there was claws sprung out of the pads on its feet like a cat's claws, only longer. It had big yellowy eyes, only they was glazed. When I was a kid I had a porcelain marble—a croaker—that looked like that. And teeth. Long thin needle teeth that looked almost like darning needles, stickin out of its mouth. Some of them was sunk right into that steel grillwork. That's why it was still hangin on; it had hung its *own* self on by the teeth. I looked at it and knowed it had a headful of poison just like a rattlesnake, and it jumped at that go-devil when it saw it was about to be run down, trying to bite it to death. And I wouldn't be the one to try and yonk it offa there because I had cuts on my hands—hay-cuts—and I thought it would kill me as dead as a stone parker if some of that poison seeped into the cuts.

“I went around to the driver's door and opened it. The inside light come on, and I looked at that special odometer that she set for trips . . . and what I seen there was 31.6.

“I looked at that for a bit, and then I went to the back door. She'd forced the screen and broke the glass by the lock so she could get her hand through and let herself in. There was a note that said: 'Dear Homer—got here a little sooner than I thought I would. Found a shortcut, and it is a dilly! You hadn't come yet so I let myself in like a burglar.



Worth is coming day after tomorrow. Can you get the screen fixed and the door reglazed by then? Hope so. Things like that always bother him. If I don't come out to say hello, you'll know I'm asleep. The drive was very tiring, but I was here in no time! Ophelia.'

"*Tirin!* I took another look at that bogey-thing hangin offa the grille of her car, and I thought Yessir, it *must* have been tiring. By God, *yes.*"

He paused again, and cracked a restless knuckle.

"I seen her only once more. About a week later. Worth was there, but he was swimmin out in the lake, back and forth, back and forth, like he was sawin wood or signin papers. More like he was signin papers, I guess.

"'Missus,' I says, 'this ain't my business, but you ought to leave well enough alone. That night you come back and broke the glass of the door to come in, I seen something hangin off the front of your car—'

"'Oh, the chuck! I took care of that,' she says.

"'Christ!' I says. 'I hope you took some care!'

"'I wore Worth's gardening gloves,' she said. 'It wasn't anything anyway, Homer, but a jumped-up woodchuck with a little poison in it.'

"'But missus,' I says, 'where there's woodchucks there's bears. And if that's what the woodchucks look like along your shortcut, what's going to happen to you if a bear shows up?'

"She looked at me, and I seen that other woman in her—that Diana-woman. She says, 'If things are different along those roads, Homer, maybe I am different, too. Look at this.'

"Her hair was done up in a clip at the back, looked sort of like a butterfly and had a stick through it. She let it down. It was the kind of hair that would make a man wonder what it would look like spread out over a pillow. She says, 'It was coming in gray, Homer. Do you see any gray?' And she spread it with her fingers so the sun could shine on it.

"'No'm,' I says.

"She looks at me, her eyes all a-sparkle, and she says, 'Your wife is a good woman, Homer Buckland, but she has seen me in the store and in the post office, and we've passed the odd word or two, and I have seen her looking at my hair in a kind of satisfied way that only women know. I know what she says, and what she tells her friends . . . that Ophelia Todd has started dyeing her hair. But I have not. I have lost my way looking for a shortcut more than once . . . lost my way . . . and lost my gray.' And she laughed, not like a college girl but like a girl in high school. I admired her and longed for her beauty, but I seen that other beauty in her face as well just then . . . and I felt afraid again. Afraid *for* her, and afraid *of* her.

“ ‘Missus,’ I says, ‘you stand to lose more than a little sta’ch in your hair.’

“ ‘No,’ she said. ‘I tell you I am different over there . . . I am *all myself* over there. When I am going along that road in my little car I am not Ophelia Todd, Worth Todd’s wife who could never carry a child to term, or that woman who tried to write poetry and failed at it, or the woman who sits and takes notes in committee meetings, or anything or anyone else. When I am on that road I am in the heart of myself, and I feel like—’

“ ‘*Diana,*’ I said.

“She looked at me kind of funny and kind of surprised, and then she laughed. ‘O like some goddess, I suppose,’ she said. ‘She will do better than most because I am a night person—I love to stay up until my book is done or until the National Anthem comes on the TV, and because I am very pale, like the moon—Worth is always saying I need a tonic, or blood tests or some sort of similar bosh. But in her heart what every woman wants to be is some kind of goddess, I think—men pick up a ruined echo of that thought and try to put them on pedestals (a woman, who will pee down her own leg if she does not squat! It’s funny when you stop to think of it)—but what a man senses is not what a woman wants. A woman wants to be in the clear, is all. To stand if she will, or walk . . . “Her eyes turned toward that little go-devil in the driveway, and narrowed. Then she smiled. ‘Or to *drive*, Homer. A man will not see that. He thinks a goddess wants to loll on a slope somewhere on the foothills of Olympus and eat fruit, but there is no god or goddess in that. All a woman wants is what a man wants—a woman wants to *drive*.’

“ ‘Be careful where you drive, missus, is all,’ I says, and she laughs and give me a kiss spang in the middle of the forehead.

“She says, ‘I will, Homer,’ but it didn’t mean nothing, and I know it, because she said it like a man who says he’ll be careful to his wife or his girl when he knows he won’t . . . can’t.

“I went back to my truck and waved to her once, and it was a week later that Worth reported her missing. Her and that go-devil both. Todd waited seven years and had her declared legally dead, and then he waited another year for good measure—I’ll give the sucker that much—and then he married the second Missus Todd, the one that just went by. And I don’t expect you’ll believe a single damn word of the whole yarn.”

In the sky one of those big flat-bottomed clouds moved enough to disclose the ghost of the moon—half-full and pale as milk. And something in my heart leaped up at the sight, half in fright, half in love.

“I do though,” I said. “Every frigging damned word. And even if it ain’t true, Homer, it ought to be.”

He give me a hug around the neck with his forearm, which is all men can do since the world don't let them kiss but only women, and laughed, and got up.

"Even if it *shouldn't* ought to be, it is," he said. He got his watch out of his pants and looked at it. "I got to go down the road and check on the Scott place. You want to come?"

"I believe I'll sit here for a while," I said, "and think."

He went to the steps, then turned back and looked at me, half-smiling. "I believe she was right," he said. "She *was* different along those roads she found . . . wasn't nothing that would dare touch her. You or me, maybe, but not her.

"And I believe she's young."

Then he got in his truck and set off to check the Scott place.

That was two years ago, and Homer has since gone to Vermont, as I think I told you. One night he came over to see me. His hair was combed, he had a shave, and he smelled of some nice lotion. His face was clear and his eyes were alive. That night he looked sixty instead of seventy, and I was glad for him and I envied him and I hated him a little, too. Arthritis is one buggardly great old fisherman, and that night Homer didn't look like arthritis had any fishhooks sunk into his hands the way they were sunk into mine.

"I'm going," he said.

"Ayuh?"

"Ayuh."

"All right; did you see to forwarding your mail?"

"Don't want none forwarded," he said. "My bills are paid. I am going to make a clean break."

"Well, give me your address. I'll drop you a line from one time to the another, old hoss." Already I could feel loneliness settling over me like a cloak . . . and looking at him, I knew that things were not quite what they seemed.

"Don't have none yet," he said.

"All right," I said. "Is it Vermont, Homer?"

"Well," he said, "It'll do for people who want to know."

I almost didn't say it and then I did. "What does she look like now?"

"Like Diana," he said. "But she is kinder."

"I envy you, Homer," I said, and I did.

I stood at the door. It was twilight in that deep part of summer when the fields fill with perfume and Queen Anne's Lace. A full moon was beating a silver track across the lake. He went across my porch and down

the steps. A car was standing on the soft shoulder of the road, its engine idling heavy, the way the old ones do that still run full bore straight ahead and damn the torpedoes. Now that I think of it, the car *looked* like a torpedo. It looked beat up some, but as if it could go the ton without breathin hard. He stopped at the foot of my steps and picked something up—it was his gas-can, the big one that holds ten gallons. He went down my walk to the passenger side of the car. She leaned over and opened the door. The inside light came on and just for a moment I saw her, long red hair around her face, her forehead shining like a lamp. Shining like the *moon*. He got in and she drove away. I stood out on my porch and watched the taillights of her little go-devil twinkling red in the dark . . . getting smaller and smaller. They were like embers, then they were like flickerflies, and then they were gone.

Vermont, I tell the folks from town, and Vermont they believe, because it's as far as most of them can see inside their heads. Sometimes I almost believe it myself, mostly when I'm tired and done up. Other times I think about them, though—all this October I have done so, it seems, because October is the time when men think mostly about far places and the roads which might get them there. I sit on the bench in front of Bell's Market and think about Homer Buckland and about the beautiful girl who leaned over to open his door when he come down that path with the full red gasoline can in his right hand—she looked like a girl of no more than sixteen, a girl on her learner's permit, and her beauty *was* terrible, but I believe it would no longer kill the man it turned itself on; for a moment her eyes lit on me, I was not killed, although part of me died at her feet.

Olympus must be a glory to the eyes and the heart, and there are those who crave it and those who find a clear way to it, mayhap, but I know Castle Rock like the back of my hand and I could never leave it for no shortcuts where the roads may go; in October the sky over the lake is no glory but it is passing fair, with those big white clouds that move so slow; I sit here on the bench, and think about 'Phelia Todd and Homer Buckland, and I don't necessarily wish I was where they are . . . but I still wish I was a smoking man.



## Are You Afraid of the Dark?

Charles L. Grant

*Charles L. Grant was born in New Jersey in 1942 and has lived in that state most of his life, except for four years at Trinity College in Connecticut and two years as an MP in Vietnam. Grant's first story was published in 1968, while he was a high school teacher. He turned to writing full-time in 1975. He has published some twenty books—novels and short story collections—and has edited almost as many anthologies, most notably the Shadows series for Doubleday. In addition, Grant has published over eighty short stories in various magazines and anthologies, and (under the pseudonyms Felicia Andrews and Deborah Lewis) he has written a dozen gothic novels. His recent books include Night Songs, The Tea Party, and The Long Night of the Grave, as well as the anthologies, Shadows 8, Midnights 1, and Greystone Bay. In 1984 Grant contributed one-third of the three-author anthology series from Dark Harvest, Night Visions, and in 1985 he is guest editor of Night Visions 2.*

*Somehow Grant found time from his busy schedule to be Guest of Honour at Fantasycon IX in Birmingham, England this past fall. It was in the Fantasycon IX Programme Booklet that "Are You Afraid of the Dark?" first appeared. The story is one of Grant's best, and it is a pleasure to be able to present it to the wider audience it deserves.*

THE STORM BEGAN MOVING just below the horizon, setting houses and trees in sharp silhouette, freezing the clouds in gray and roiling white; it buried the sunset and drove off the stars and replaced the moon's shadows with strobic shadows of its own.

Yet it was harmless out there, far enough away to make people smile, glance at their watches and walk only a bit faster. There was no warning in the forecast, and its own warning was muttered, softened by the spring air just an hour ago filled with sun and new flowers and leaves brilliant green on the trees along the curbs.

Then the breeze became a wind, and the storm turned around, a

panther stalking the night with flashes of lightning where its claws touched the ground, grumblings of thunder when it spotted its prey.

The breeze became a wind, and the temperature dropped, and all that was left was the waiting for the rain.

The padded deacon's bench had been turned around to face the picture window in the den. The floral draperies had been pulled back, the lights had been turned off, and the backyard was visible only between the blinks of an eye, as the storm moved overhead and crashed down on the house. Lightning escaped the confines of black clouds, flaring, crackling, giving the trees angled movement and turning the back hedge into a huge black wall. The ornamental wishing well, the birdbath, the tool shed in the corner, all of them curiously flat when the air burned blue-white ahead of the thunder. The leaves were silver, the grass pale gray, and the reflections in the pane were bloodless and transparent.

"She's right," Jeremy Kneale said, squirming on the bench but not wanting to leave. "Bernie's right, it's just like a movie."

"It is not. It's stupid. It's dark out, can't you see that?" Stacey flinched at the next lightning bolt, but he still wasn't impressed. "It's dumb. I wanna watch TV."

"Bernie says we can't," Will reminded him. "She says we have to wait until something good comes on."

"Her real name," said Stacey, "is Bernadette, and Bernadette is a real pain in the ass."

Jeremy winced at the way his friend talked about their new babysitter, but he didn't say a word. Scolding Stacey Parsons was a waste of time. He knew that. He had heard his mother tell his father that a hundred times, and heard them wonder how the boy's parents managed without strangling him. That part was a joke; at least, he thought it was a joke.

Behind them, through the swinging door that led into the kitchen, they could hear Bernie working. Making popcorn. Fixing trays. Getting glasses from the cupboard and pouring them soda.

"I feel stupid," Will confessed at last.

Jeremy did too, but he wouldn't admit it. He was in enough trouble already, and the one thing he didn't need was Bernie telling his folks that he was being difficult again. Yet it wasn't his fault. He liked to explore things, go places, find new games to play with his best friends in the whole world. Just because it sometimes got him into trouble with the neighbors, or with people he didn't even know, didn't mean he was bad. Like the window this afternoon at the toy shop. He didn't mean to break it, but Stacey had ducked when he'd tossed the rock at him. Not a throw,

just a toss, and it must have hit the pane just right because the next thing they knew there was glass all over the pavement and lots of big people reaching for them so they wouldn't run away.

It was an accident.

His parents didn't believe him.

And parents, Stacey had said once, never believed the kid when there was a grownup around. You had to be big to be believed; you had to be able to defend yourself with something else besides tears.

"I'm hungry," Will Young said, standing and walking away from the window. He turned on a lamp, blinking at the light.

"Yeah," said Stacey. He stood, gestured, and he and Jeremy turned the bench around where it belonged. Then he closed the drapes and sat again, hands in his lap, feet swinging. "I wish she'd hurry up."

"It's like prison," Will said, rubbing his hands together and grinning. "Bernie is the guard, see, and our parents are off to see the governor, to find out when they're going to throw the switch."

"Where'd you hear that?" Jeremy asked.

"Saw it in a movie."

Jeremy shook his head. "I saw that movie, and you got it wrong. They're supposed to find out if the governor is going to stop them from throwing the switch."

"Sure," Stacey said. "Did you see the look on my father's face when he found out what happened today?" He shuddered. "I know that look. He's gonna be right there by the guy with the black mask. He's gonna throw the switch himself."

Jeremy had to agree. He had never seen any of their parents so angry before. As if he and his buddies had deliberately set out to find trouble, or cause it when they couldn't find it, and lied about it when they did. Of course, they didn't always tell the truth because then they'd really get clobbered. As it was, they were supposed to stay on their own property for a whole two weeks, and the only reason they were allowed together tonight was because his father had decided it was time the six grownups got together and decided what to do about taming their hellions.

He didn't know exactly what hellions meant when he heard his father on the phone with Mr. Young the other night, but he did know it wasn't good. And he knew that this time they weren't going to be able to cry or beg or pout their way out of whatever punishment there was going to be. Staying home wasn't punishment; staying home was only getting ready for whatever big stuff was coming after.

Lightning; and thunder.

Ashes in the fireplace shifting into piles.



The wind rattling the pane and keening through the eaves.

The boys jumped, smiled nervously, and jumped again when the kitchen door pushed open and Bernie came out with a tray in her hands. She walked to the cardtable in the middle of the room and put the tray in the center. There were three glasses filled with soda, a huge bowl of popcorn, and three chocolate candy bars.

None of the boys moved. They only watched as the babysitter frowned at the closed drapes, at the turned-around bench, and at Will still standing by the floorlamp in the corner. Her short brown hair seemed darker tonight, her eyes deeper, her nose sharper, and when she brushed her hands down the side of her dress, she seemed less like a friend than the guard Will had described.

"I thought," she said, "you were going to watch the storm."

"That's dumb," Stacey told her.

"Yeah," Will agreed.

She turned to Jeremy then and waited for his answer.

He shrugged. He didn't want to get her mad, didn't want her to tell his mother and father he was being a pain again. Bernie was all right, and he wanted to keep her on his side. She had stayed with him twice before, and with Stacey and Will too, just after the big trouble started, and though she sometimes made him nervous the way she looked at him, the way she walked around the house without making a sound, he thought she was pretty okay, for a grownup.

"Sit," she said, and pointed at the bench.

They did, sensing something in her manner that forestalled rebellion. Besides, they could smell the butter on the popcorn, see the bubbles in the soda, and the chocolate bars were the largest they had ever seen in their lives.

"We're going to have a contest," she told them, standing behind the table with her hands folded at her waist. "It's going to be a lot of fun. The only thing is, you can't be afraid."

"Afraid?" Stacey said. "Who's afraid?"

Bernie smiled slowly. "Aren't you scared of the dark?"

Stacey laughed, Will sneered, Jeremy pulled on his ear.

She stared at them until Will giggled.

"Stace is scared of the ocean," he said, taking a punch on the arm.

"Yeah? Well, you're scared of the dark, you even still gotta nightlight."

Jeremy kept silent—he was only scared of his parents.

"Good," she said. "That's fine, because the contest, you see, is a series of games that I pick for you to play."

"Big deal," said Will, poking Jeremy in the ribs.

“What is it, spin the bottle?” Stacey said, laughing until he saw the look on her face.

“Thank you,” she said. “Now pay attention, please. I want you to listen closely. Since you’re not afraid of the dark, I’ll pick something . . .” She looked to the ceiling, looked down, and touched the table. “If you get scared, you lose.”

“Jesus, Bernie,” Stacey said. “We’re not babies, you know.”

“I know,” she told him. “And that’s what I told your parents. You’re not babies any more. You can take it. You’re tough.”

“Right,” Stacey said, Will nodded emphatically, and Jeremy said, “Take what?”

Bernie ignored him. “The rules are simple: I pick the games, nobody quits before the end, and for every game you win you get to keep a bar of this chocolate.”

“That’s not fair!” Stacey complained.

Bernie smiled. “Second place gets popcorn.”

“Hey!” said Will.

“And last place gets to sleep in the rain.”

Jeremy looked at his friends, looked at Bernie, and decided that this wasn’t going to be a good night after all.

She looked at her watch. “We’d better get started. I promised your parents we’d be done before they return. Are you ready?”

They each nodded, staring at the chocolate bars each weighing three pounds.

“In that case,” she said, in the thunder, in the lightning, while the wind knocked on the door, “the first game is:”

### *hide-and-seek*

It was dark, so dark it was like living in a black cloud.

And it was quiet, except for the sound of his breathing.

Will Young closed his mouth and his eyes and wished he wasn’t so fat. His mother was always yelling at him for eating too much, and for sneaking food into his bedroom after he was supposed to be asleep. But he didn’t care. He enjoyed eating. It didn’t matter what there was in the cupboards or in the refrigerator as long as it was good—and there wasn’t much he didn’t like.

And he didn’t think he was really gross-and-ugly fat, not like his father was, with his belly showing even when his shirt was all buttoned. He just had a little extra here and there around his waist and his face, and that definitely didn’t stop him from being able to run, or climb, or crawl under

the porch; at least his arms didn't have all that flab hanging down, and at least his thighs didn't rub together because there was no room between them.

Nevertheless, he wished now he was a little slimmer, because then he could squeeze a bit farther back in the closet, maybe behind the golf bag that belonged to Jerry's father. He didn't think he'd have to stay here very long because Stacey said it was a dumb game and didn't want to play and would probably deliberately get himself caught first. Jerry knew the house better than anyone, but Will thought he was scared of something and would probably head right for the cellar, the first place Bernie would look.

The huge closet in the upstairs hall, then, was almost perfect when he found it. Clothes and coats hanging from the rail, boxes and stuff stacked on the floor, and the door so snug no light came underneath it.

He reached out his hands and felt around him, trying to move things in front and move himself farther back, without making any noise. He breathed through his mouth. He froze whenever he heard footsteps passing outside.

And he finally reached the corner after moving the golf bag aside.

Perfect. Dark, but perfect. Bernie would have to declare him the winner of this game, no question about it.

He grinned, and rubbed his hands together.

He pulled his knees up to his chest, and listened to the muffled spill of thunder over the roof.

And heard something move on the other side of the closet.

He blinked and cocked his head, frowning as he listened as hard as he could and wondering what it was, or maybe it was his imagination.

A *scratching*, soft and slow, maybe it's a rat or a bat or something that lives in the back of the closet and waits for dopes like him to play stupid baby games in the middle of a storm; a *scratching*, soft and slow, and something suddenly brushed quickly over his face. He almost yelled as he lashed out to knock it away, nearly yelled again when his fingers were caught, trapped in something that had round hard teeth. His free hand grabbed for it while he pushed deeper into the corner, grabbed and yanked, and something fell over his face.

He did yell, then, but the sound was muffled, all sound deadened as his feet kicked out and struck the golf bag, as his head slammed against the wall, as his hands tore and pulled and the thing dropped and tangled into his lap, and a coat hanger a moment later fell onto his chest.

Shit, he thought as he felt the jacket on his legs, the round buttons, the smooth lapels. Shit, you're a jerk.

He shuddered and rolled his shoulders, wiped a hand over his eyes and felt the perspiration slick on his face. He dried himself with the jacket and pulled the golf bag back in front of him, proud that he'd fought the demons and hadn't been killed.

Besides, this proved that he'd made a good choice. This proved he could be quiet.

Bernie, he knew then, would never find him now. She might open the door, but even the light from the hall wouldn't reach him back here. And she sure wouldn't come in, not with that dress on. He giggled, and quickly covered his mouth. He didn't know her very well, only the two other times he'd been over when she'd sat with Jeremy, but he knew she wouldn't want to dirty that dress. She was very careful about it. He could see that. He could see how she stayed away from the walls, and held the skirt away from anything that might touch it and make it dirty.

She was weird, and not even Jeremy could tell him he was wrong. Weird, and always looking at them as if they were bugs or something. Sometimes she was fun, like with the spooky stories she'd tell them, but most of the time she just sat on the bench in the den and watched them. Like a guard. Like a dog. Until Mr. and Mrs. Kneale came home, and then she would put on her coat and leave without even saying goodnight.

Weird.

Really weird.

And a *scratching* in the corner.

A laugh outside as Stacey ran down the hall, telling his two friends he was caught but don't give up, Bernie was a jerk, and they'd share the chocolate later.

Will smiled and nodded to himself. One down, one to go. All she had to do was find Jeremy and the game was all his. All that candy, all his.

His stomach growled.

Something scratched lightly in the corner, and he wished there wasn't such a draft in here, tickling his neck and making him think there was something crawling through his hair. The wind outside had found a hole in the walls, had snuck around the window, and now he was getting cold and the clothes were moving and rustling together, whispering to each and scratching.

*are you afraid of the dark?*

A monster, he thought then, and squeezed his eyes closed, grateful for the colored lights that swirled in small circles and the curtains of faint orange that drifted down from the top, disappeared and came back; there was a monster in the closet.

He shifted, and heard someone walking the hall outside the door.

Bernie, he called silently, go find Jeremy, I'm not here.

A monster in with him, but the candy bars were huge and all he had to do was wait until his best friend was found.

A coat hanger scraped on the metal pole overhead.

Besides, there's no such things as monsters and I will not be afraid because I am hungry and I want that candy, he thought, his hands tight in fists, his eyes still closed.

Something thumped against the golf bag, and the clubs inside rattled. No such thing. No such thing.

The bag quivered again, and he felt a weight press against the sole of his sneaker. And he sighed his relief, grinned and shook his head at how stupid he could be. It had been his foot all the time. He had unthinkingly stretched a leg out and had kicked the bag with his foot, so there was nothing to worry about, alone here in the dark.

*scratching*

Then he heard Jeremy running, probably from his bedroom, not the cellar after all, telling Will it was over, that he'd won the first game.

He sighed again, loudly, and nodded. He knew he would win. How could they have thought otherwise? Wasn't he the champion hide-and-seeker in the whole school, if not the whole entire world? Couldn't he do something wrong and then hide from his parents until they were nearly frantic with fear until he popped out and smiled and they forgot they were angry?

Shit, he was the champ. Bernie should have known.

A footstep by the door.

And a *scratching* inside.

He grinned and shifted, and took hold of the bag.

Someone turned the lock . . . turned and lock and walked away. "Hey," he said. "Hey, Bernie, it's me!"

And he pushed the bag aside, and saw the red eyes staring at him.

The candy bars sat in the middle of the table, and Stacey stood as close as he dared, one eye on Bernie fussing with the logs in the fireplace, the other on the reward he would win the next time. Had Jeremy been last, it would have been different because Jerry was okay. But Will was a p-i-g hog and he didn't think he could stand sitting here watching that pig scoff down all that chocolate.

Bernie rose and dusted her hands on the apron she wore around her waist.

Stacey decided he would win the next one, and let Jerry have the last.

At least that way, Will-the-pig wouldn't hog it all and make them look stupid besides.

"Are you ready?" she asked, standing on the hearth.

Jeremy looked toward the stairs that led to the first floor. "But we can't," he said. "We gotta wait for Will."

"The hell with Will," Stacey said with a sneer. "He's got his dumb candy, how he's just playing. We oughta let him stay wherever he is all night."

"That's not fair!"

"If that's the way Will wants it," Bernie said softly, "then that's the way he'll have it. If he's not back before we finish the next game, he'll forfeit his prize."

"Yeah!" Stacey said. "Way t'go, Bernie."

She smiled briefly, and he smiled back. She was really queer, but she had bigger tits even than his mother, and he didn't think she knew that he'd been trying to look down her dress all night. He'd whispered that to Jerry while they were waiting for Will, and the dip had blushed. He really had blushed. Stacey figured the kid didn't know anything about women, and wasn't surprised. His old man was the strictest parent in the world, and wouldn't even let him look at photography magazines. That was dumb. That was really and truly dumb.

"So," he said, "when do we start?"

"Stace . . ."

"Aw, c'mon, huh? They're gonna be back soon. We gotta get a move on."

"Stacey's right," Bernie said. She reached into the apron pocket, then, and pulled out something wrapped in white cloth. Slowly, she pulled the corners aside, and he saw in her palm a massive red jewel. It caught the dim light and doubled it, seemed to quiver when thunder rumbled through the room.

"Wow," he said.

"This," she said, "was taken from a very rich man. He has the police looking for it. He's given them one hour to find it or else." She smiled without showing her teeth. "We're going to play."

### *cops and robbers*

Stacey knew he had made a mistake. He should have found some place inside to hide the jewel, but had convinced himself that Jerry would have found it in less than ten minutes. After all, it was his house, and he knew all the good places where such a thing could be hidden.

But this was silly.

He stood on the patio, the wind tearing at his hair and lashing it in his face, making him squint, hunching his shoulders, making his arms tremble as he considered digging a hole in one of the potted plants and burying it there.

No. Once Jerry knew he'd left the house, that would be the first place he'd look. And there wasn't time to dig a hole in the yard because the ground was still hard and he didn't have any tools.

Dumb, Parsons, he told himself when the wind turned him around. Really and truly dumb.

Then a streak of cloud-smothered lightning illuminated the backyard, and he grinned so hard his cheeks began to ache.

The well. That stupid plaster well Mrs. Kneale had bought last summer. They were forbidden to go near it, to touch, even to breathe on it, which didn't bother him because he thought it was stupid. What good was a well when it didn't go anywhere? All Mr. Kneale had done was take it out of the station wagon with Jerry and his help, and carried it to the yard, plunked it down, and got himself a beer to celebrate. Mrs. Kneale had applauded like they'd moved the stupid damn Empire State Building, and after that she and Jerry's father would sit on the patio and toss pennies at it, making wishes. She'd wanted Stacey to do it once, and he did because Jerry was his friend, but he'd felt dumb and he made Jerry swear later he wouldn't tell a soul.

Then, in August, he'd had an idea.

Mr. Kneale was getting pretty good at pitching the coins in; he could even do it most times with his eyes closed. So one night, when they were supposed to have been over at Will's, they snuck through the hole in the hedge and moved the well over. Just a few inches, not enough to notice.

Mr. Kneale missed, moved his chair, and recovered his aim.

They moved the well again, back where it was, and sat on the other side of the hedge in Will's yard and laughed themselves into hiccups when they heard the guy swearing.

They managed it twice more, until the night Jerry slipped on the damp grass and the well landed hard. One side cracked. A small split they didn't think anyone would notice.

Mrs. Kneale did, and that stupid Jerry broke the minute she asked him if they'd been fooling around.

Stupidass Jerry. Him and his stupidass books and his posters and not even knowing what Bernie looked like without her clothes. Damn, but they'd gotten into a hell of a lot of trouble, especially when Stacey had

let slip a fuck-word when his mother grabbed for his arm. Christ, that had put him in his room for a whole goddamned week.

The well, then. Jerry was still too scared to go near it, and wouldn't dream that his old pal still had the nerve.

He hurried off the patio onto the grass, crouched over and running on his toes, stopping once when lightning put a shadow in front of him and it took him a moment to realize it was his own. A look back over his shoulder, the draperies were still closed, and he dove around the side of the well, out of the wind.

Buried lightning again, and the mutter of thunder, and he whirled around when he thought he heard something coming through the hedge.

Nothing. It was nothing.

The leaves husked and branches rattled, and grass crawled toward his legs, and all the houses he could see were perfectly dark. Holes in the night; mouths of black monsters that ate people after sunset.

"Fuck," he said into the wind. It made him feel better, because the wind was getting on his nerves. "Fuck, shit, damn, hell." He smiled, and pulled the ruby out of his pocket, lifted his hand to drop it in the well when he stopped; frowned, and wondered just how stupid dumb Jerry really was. He just might think of the well, he just might, and if he looked inside with a flashlight he'd see it right away and get all the chocolate. Worse; he'd brag about it to every kid in the school, every day for a goddamned year. Worse yet, he'd prove he was such a good little boy that his parents would lift the grounding, and leave Stacey stuck in his room.

What he had to do then was think like a robber, a crook who was going to come back real soon and take the loot and run away once the cops had been by. He nodded to himself, looked back to the toolshed and knew that was too obvious. If he was going to hide it out here, then, he would have to put it in the well, but cover it with something. Grass, maybe some dirt, so the light wouldn't shine off it.

Suddenly, lightning sheered out of the clouds, ripping a hole in the night like a sheet tearing in half. He jumped and clutched the jewel to his stomach, closed his eyes and waited for the thunder.

When it came, cracking the air and smashing over his head, his ears stoppered, and he yelled, jumped to his feet and stared wide-eyed at the house.

This was nuts. He was going to fry out here, all for a stupid piece of chocolate.

Then he put a hand on the plaster lip and looked into the well.  
And blinked.



The edge only came to his waist, but it looked like it dropped a hundred miles into the ground. Maybe even a million. Mr. Kneale must've dug a hole under it, to pretend it was real and keep them from playing their trick on him again. He smiled; it was perfect. And he leaned over, reached out his hand, and when lightning flared again he could see all the way to the bottom. To the grass. To the lousy damned grass.

"Well, shit," he said, and without wasting any more time, he hitched himself onto the lip and dropped in.

The wind passing over the mouth sounded like hollow trumpets, and the sides quivered, the peaked roof shook, and the plastic bucket on the chain rocked alarmingly fast. It was a tight fit, but he had plenty of room to dig a small hole between his shoes with his fingers, place the jewel carefully inside and cover it again. Then he waited for the next bolt to be sure his work couldn't be seen.

When it came, he saw the water, and couldn't stop himself from falling toward the red eyes floating toward him.

This isn't funny any more, Jeremy thought, but he didn't have the nerve to leave the deacon's bench and complain. Bernie was in the kitchen again, making something on the stove, rattling pans and banging spoons and whistling so far off-key the noise scraped his spine like claws on a blackboard.

This isn't fun.

He looked over his shoulder, out the window to the yard that flicked in and out of his vision, white, black, white again and jumping over the well in the center. He had thoughts, a few minutes ago, that he'd seen Stacey creeping around there, but when the lightning came again and there was nothing to see, he changed his mind. Stacey was crazy, but not crazy enough for that.

His tongue touched his upper lip.

His left foot tapped on the floor.

He looked to the stairwell when he thought he heard Will, then looked to the back door when he thought he heard Stace.

Then the kitchen door slammed open, and Bernie walked in.

He blinked, and tried to smile, but there was an ice cube settling on the back of his neck, and it grew when he heard the first spattering of rain on the window.

Bernie sat in his father's chair by the fireplace and looked at the charred logs, raised her head and smiled straight at him. Her face was in partial shadow, and he could see only one eye, only one part of the mouth, only a few of her teeth.

“Are you worried about your friends?”

He nodded, and swallowed because he thought he was going to break down and cry, and that was the one thing he’d promised himself he’d never do again. All it ever did was get a slap from his father, or a shout from his mother—act your age, Jeremy Kneale, you’re not a baby any more.

“I wouldn’t,” she whispered. “They’re doing just fine.”

“How do you know?” he said, more angrily than he’d intended. “All you do is make that stupid popcorn. Will is hurt somewhere, I just know it. And Stacey must be out there in all that rain.” He rose and stood in front of her, hands clenched at his sides, fighting the burning that flushed his cheeks. “You don’t care. You just want to get us in trouble again, that’s all. Our folks are gonna come home, and we’re gonna get in the biggest trouble in the world.”

Bernie clasped her hands in her lap and watched the logs again, as if they were burning. “Jeremy, do you know what bog butter is?”

He frowned, looked away, looked back. “What?”

“It’s our game, Jeremy. Surely you haven’t forgotten the third game. Now answer my question: Have you ever heard of bog butter?”

“I . . .” He felt a tear in his right eye, a lump of coal in his throat. “Huh?”

She smiled dreamily, and sighed. “In the old days, long before there was even a United States, they used to bury people in marshes over in England. You know what a marsh is?”

He nodded.

The rain slapped at the pane, ran over the edge of the gutter and poured into the shrubs cringing under the window.

“Well, sometimes, when they dug these people up, they found that the bodies had oozed a kind of wax over themselves. It looked a little like butter, I guess, so they called it bog butter.”

“That’s nice,” he said, knowing it sounded stupid, but what else could he say? His friends were lost in the storm and in the house, and Bernie was sitting in his father’s chair talking about dead bodies and butter and god!, he wished she’d shut up so he could talk to her.

“At the time, of course, they didn’t know what has caused it, or why it was there.”

He edged away, his head ducking, his hips turning before he did. And when she didn’t seem to notice, he backed up to the staircase, then flung himself up, racing down the hall to his room on the far end. He checked under the bed, in his closet, under his desk, in the toy chest. He looked out the window and saw nothing but the rain.

He ducked into his parents’ room, and looked in everything that could

have held Will, and everything that couldn't, not caring that they'd find out when they saw the mess he made.

The guest room was just as empty.

"Will?"

The bathroom echoed thunder.

"Will!"

He was sweating now, and he couldn't stop his fingers from snapping, couldn't stop his lips from moving as if he were talking to himself. He checked the hall closet, but it was locked. He shook the door as hard as he could, then turned the bolt over and reached in for the string that snapped on the light.

Something fell against his legs, and he jumped back, yelping, then scowling at an empty shoebox that had dropped from the high shelf.

When he turned the light on, he saw nothing, not even when he crammed himself in and pushed everything aside that he could move, or kick, or butt with his hips.

Will wasn't there.

He stood in the middle of the hall, turning in a tight circle and yanking his head away from the lightning.

"Will, where *are* you?"

In the bathroom, a faucet began dripping.

"Will!"

Downstairs, then, into the living room, the dining room, the coat closet, the pantry.

He raced through the den, and heard Bernadette still talking about corpses in old England.

He flung open the front door and stood in the rain, not caring how wet he was getting, just hoping to catch a glimpse of Stacey returning with fat Will in tow. He ran around the house and screamed over the storm into the shrubbery, into the garage, into hedging that whipped at his arms and drew blood on his cheek.

"Stacey!" A cry more than a shout.

"Will!" Begging more than demanding.

There was no one in the tool shed, no one in the well.

He plunged back inside and stood by the table.

"Bernie."

She sighed, lightning flared, and the lamp flickered out.

"Bernie, answer me!"

He swung his arm and knocked over the bowl of popcorn. He kicked the table's near leg and toppled the glasses of soda. He picked up a chocolate bar and flung it at the hearth.

"Bernie, dammit!"

"Now that," she said, "is one of the things your father objects to. That kind of language."

"But—"

"And not paying attention. He said—they all said—none of you pay the slightest attention to them." She turned her head; he could see it moving though he couldn't see her eyes. "I could see that the first time I came here. And I could see something else, something rather sad, when you think about it a bit."

He shook his head and felt the water scattering across the room. "I don't give a damn about them now," he said, grabbing the cardtable by its edges and tipping it to the floor. "I want to know what you did with Will and Stacey!"

"You see, Jeremy, there are some people who just aren't cut out to be parents. They haven't the innate skills, or the temperament for it. Soon enough, they learn that children aren't pets, they're real human beings, and that's quite a revelation, don't you think? That children are human beings?"

He started to cry. He couldn't help it. Frustration at her refusal to respond made him so angry he couldn't stop the tears, or the way his legs stiffened as he kicked aside the wreckage and started to walk toward her.

"You, of course, didn't help very much," she said in light scolding.

"Bernie, please!"

"So your father found someone who knew me. And I came to help them get over their problem."

He stopped.

He could hear the soft whisper of Bernie's dress as she pushed out of the chair; he could hear the moist rattling of her breath in her throat; he could hear the odd way her feet struck the carpet as she walked over to meet him.

"Now, do you remember what I said about bog butter, Jeremy?"

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and screamed, "I don't care!"

"Ah, but you should, dear, you should."

There was lightning, and he gasped.

"They thought, you see, it was a curious little by-product of decomposition."

There was thunder, and the lamp flickered.

"It isn't, you know."

The lamp steadied, and he saw her, saw her soft silken dress and her

soft silken hair and the glistening yellow wax that covered her soft silken arms.

“It’s protection, my love.”

He backed away, and screamed.

The lamp sizzled and went out.

“It keeps us alive. So we can help those who need us.” She laughed then, and moved closer. “Now what are you afraid of, dear Jeremy my love. Why don’t you tell me so I can show you what it’s like.”

# Catch Your Death

John Gordon

*One of the chief joys for any horror enthusiast lies in discovering a new writer. On the advice of Rosemary Pardoe, I hunted through the children's books section of Foyle's to find a book entitled Catch Your Death and Other Ghost Stories crammed in beside books about Fluffy the Bunny and the like. While the characters in these stories are often adolescents, there is nothing childish about John Gordon's fiction. This is one of the finest collections of horror stories in many years.*

*John Gordon was born in the North of England, the son of a teacher. His family moved South in the Depression of the 1930s, and he was educated at a Grammar School in East Anglia before joining the Navy in 1943. After the war he became a journalist and worked on a number of newspapers. He is now a full-time writer. Gordon is married and has two grown-up children. He enjoys music and walking. His books include The Giant Under the Snow, The House on the Brink, The Ghost on the Hill, Waterfall Box, The Spitfire Grave, and The Edge of The World, and he has published many short stories.*

"I SEEN IT."

"Ya never."

"It were bigger'n me. Bigger'n you. Bigger'n her, an' all."

"Bigger'n Sally? She's only little, your little sister is."

Ron Stibbard's head jutted forward. "I'll give you a crack acrost the skull if you don't shut up. It were bigger'n all three on us put together. It were huge."

"I should think it was huge, then." Wayne Spencer had his arms spread as though he was about to fight or fly; it didn't matter to him which it was. He had taken off his anorak and tied the sleeves round his middle so that it hung behind him like an apron in reverse. "It must have been huger than anything I ever seen. Huger than anything anybody ever seen, I reckon. Hi, Miss!"

He spun away, and Ron and Sally watched him barge into backs,

fronts, shoulders, anything in the way of his elbows as he ran up the slope of the playground toward the teacher. Miss Birdsall was looking out to sea across the rooftops, the winter mist in her eyes.

“What’s he going to do?” said Sally and put her hand in her brother’s coat pocket where he felt it stirring like a little mouse. It said more than her voice did. She was frightened.

“It don’t matter what he do. We seen it.”

“Hi, Miss.” Wayne’s shout reached them down the slope. “Ron Stibbard reckon he have seen something in the lane.”

Miss Birdsall’s gaze came slowly back from the smooth roll of the sea under the mist, crossed the slate roofs, drifted in over the railings and fluttered to rest on Wayne. “What has he seen?” she said. “And there’s no need to shout.”

It had no effect; they could still hear him. “He have seen a big black dog, Miss. Bigger’n him himself, and me, both on us together. What do you reckon, Miss?”

Her smile seemed to have a pale color, something like the blue of her eyes. “I should think he’s seen a big black dog,” she said. “Did it bite him?”

“It don’t have to bite him, Miss. Not if it’s Black Shuck. You only have to see it and you die.”

In the long lane along the cliff the boy’s voice was no more than a gull’s call. A shadow shifted in the hedge. Brown eyes blinked.

I hang in the hedge, a scatter of shadows. I am dog-shape and pad these long lanes. I am Death-Bringer.

“I had that liver for me lunch. You know I did, dear.” Mrs. Birdsall always held a little handkerchief, and now, as she gazed up at her daughter, she teased it between her fingers. “I warmed it up, just like you told me, Mary. That and a few veggies, which I done meself.”

“I meant it for supper, Mother. There was enough for both of us.” Mary Birdsall’s soft voice had no more rise and fall to it than the sea shushing against the beach at the end of the road. She gazed vacantly into the red glow of the fire. The little parlor was almost in darkness, and for a long moment the only sound was the ticking of the big clock on the mantel. She turned a sigh into a deep breath, but her mother was not deceived.

“You didn’t want me to go hungry, Mary, did you?” The handkerchief was stretched like a drumskin. “An’ you know very well you left it on the shelf for me. Why was it there if it wasn’t for me?”

"There was some cold meat, Mother. And a salad. Surely you saw them."

There was a silence in which the handkerchief was pulled from hand to hand until it nearly tore.

"You did see it, Mother?"

The handkerchief was screwed up suddenly and raised to the corner of an eye.

"You didn't eat that, too, did you?"

"It were so little, Mary. It weren't hardly filling." Her voice was a whine from the deep chair by the fireside. "And me legs have been playing me up so terrible. I can't hardly move. I've had an awful afternoon, awful. I been feeling to terrible I almost got someone to run up to the school and fetch you. But I know you don't like being interrupted, Mary."

"Mother!" Mary Birdsall took a step nearer the short, plump figure that reclined in the low chair with both legs resting on a stool. "You know that's not true. If you're really bad you've got to send for me."

The head with the tousled thin hair was turned away and the screwed-up handkerchief was pressed to the base of the nose. "I'm a martyr to me legs, Mary. You know I am. I was just starting the washing-up when it struck. I was right against the kitchen sink, and I had to cling there for I don't know how long. How I ever got back into this room I shall never know."

"How are you now, Mother?" Mary Birdsall put the bag she was carrying down on the floor and reached for the free hand that her mother had conveniently left lying limply on the chair arm. "Are you better?"

The hand, surprisingly thin and damp, clutched feverishly at hers. "I can manage. You don't need to worry about me, dear." In the dim light of the dying fire, the liquid in her eyes glowed bravely. "I ain't intending to go just yet. I think I've got a few years left to me."

"Of course you have, Mother."

Quite suddenly, energetically, old Mrs. Birdsall was elbowing herself upright. The gleam of her eyes had caught sight of Mary's shopping-bag.

"So you got something for us after all, did you, Mary? I knew that liver wasn't for supper. There weren't hardly enough. What did you get?"

Mary Birdsall's mild eyes glazed at the wrinkled face as the stooped figure got to its feet.

"There's nothing wrong with your legs, now, Mother."

"I been resting them. They'll be all right for a minute. What was it you fetched?"

"I came straight from school. I haven't been to the shop." Mary picked up the bag and with the first precise action she had made since coming



into the room, she began placing its contents on the table. "Schoolbooks, Mother. I've got some marking to do tonight."

"What's the use o' them?" The old mouth turned down at the corners and the rounded shoulders swung away from her daughter as Mrs. Birdsall shuffled toward the door in the corner.

"If you get the washing-up done, Mother, I'll just go and get something from the shop."

"I got to pay a call."

Mary Birdsall heard the bathroom latch rattle and the door shut.

"Ron." Sally had to take a step and a half to each stride of her brother's to keep up with him. "It isn't true what he said about our dog, is it?"

She spoke very carefully because she had a lisp, so he knew what she was saying before she had finished, but even then she had to wait several paces before he replied.

"It ain't our dog."

"Well it nearly is. It comes to see us, and it don't bark."

"You heard what Miss said. She said Black Shuck were just a story, so it can't be Black Shuck or we'd be dead, both of us."

"We even patted it." Her voice faded to a whisper as the thought widened her eyes. He felt her hand reach into his anorak pocket and he put his own hand in beside it. She gripped his fingers.

"You got nothing to worry about, Sally," he said, but he brought them both to a halt in the center of the lane and they turned to look back. They could see the school against the gray sky, but most of the village was hidden in the dip of the cliffs. "I was just wonderin'," he said, "if Wayne was tagging along behind us." The tarmac strip of the lane, wet with the mist creeping in from the sea, gleamed emptily. "But there ain't a smell of him. I might have known he'd be chicken."

"I'm scared." Her voice was still very small. "I don't want to be dead."

The cliffs were not high and the sound of the waves reached them, clapping down on the beach like falling gravestones. His courage almost flew from him and his grip on her hand tightened so hard she was startled. To disguise it he began to run, tugging her with him, leaving the village behind.

I am unseen. My black tongue lolls like winter leaves. That pebble-glint is my eye, that bent stick my leg. Death is never far.

It is centuries since I leapt for the shore across ice-gleam of oar blades and through hail hiss in sea spume. Icicles rattled in my pelt as I leapt, first foot on this shore.

The tang of the sharp still touches my tongue, and I hear the song they sang as fierce forks of flame thrust through thatch and wooden walls. Then they bawled in their beer, bragged of battle; blades shone as they shouted and hailed their hell-hound. I ran on before them, and death followed my swift feet; of that their sharp swords made sure.

The two women in the shop watched Mary Birdsall as she went out. "I know where she's off to now," said one, and they both laughed.

Behind the counter, Mrs. Groves said, "Well you can't blame her, not with a mother like that. I never see that old woman but what she's grumbling about this or complaining about that."

"I never do see her nowadays," said the woman with the wire basket lifting her purchases from it and putting them on the counter. "Not that I want to. But they do say she have bad legs and can't get about."

"Bad legs!" The shopkeeper knew better. "I'll tell you one thing, Mrs. Spencer, her legs is good enough to get up here every single afternoon." She nodded and pursed her lips. "No sooner does that school bell go to call the children in after dinner than she comes trotting up the road as fast as you like."

"She don't!" But Mrs. Spencer believed it. "Where do she go?"

"Here, of course. She sneaks in here and closes the door ever so softly as though Mary could hear her. That's what she's afraid of; Mary finding out. And that's why she waits until Mary's safely back in school. And you know why?"

"No I don't, Mrs. Groves." The tins and packets from the wire basket were laid out between them waiting to be rung up on the till. "I've no idea."

"Chocolate." Mrs. Groves raised her eyebrows and her chin and watched through her glasses until the word had made its impact. "Chocolate. Mars Bars. Marathons. Galaxies. It don't matter to her what they are. 'Give me one o' them,' she say, and point to it. And then she digs in her purse and thinks a bit, and says, 'And one o' them others. I'm that starved,' she say, 'Mary hardly left me nothin.'"

"Well, you surprise me. My Wayne say she's ever so kind, and so do all the children. I never knew Mary Birdsall was like that."

"She's not. Oh no." Mrs. Groves had pursed her lips again and was shaking her head. "You know as well as I do, Mrs. Spencer, that Mary is generous to a fault. There ain't a kinder person in the whole village. And I am the one who should know best of all. The food she buys here you would not believe."

"Well, it can't be for herself. She's hardly got any flesh on her." Mrs.

Spencer was looking out through the shop window, a faint smile on her mouth and her eyes glinting with interest at what she saw. "There she goes now; what did I tell you?"

The shopkeeper leaned over the counter to look around a pile of tins. "It's the same every time. She did not have to speak loudly because her head was very close to Mrs. Spencer's. "It's a wonder people don't start talking."

"They do say," Mrs. Spencer began and then broke off as the two women watched Mary hesitate in front of the little bank at the corner. A light glowed in the corn merchant's office above it, but the bank's own windows were shuttered. "There she goes." They saw Mary step across the pavement and push open the door. "And that bank's supposed to be closed," said Mrs. Spencer, and both women laughed. "Closed to everybody but Mary Birdsall, that is."

"Well, you can't blame her."

"You've got to take your pleasures when you can and wherever you can, but a bank's a funny place for it." They laughed again. "Not that Mary minds, I dare say. He ain't a bad looking feller for a bank manager."

"They won't have long," said the shopkeeper. "She'll have to get home with that ham for her mother's tea."

"I'd give her ham, the way she's treated that girl. They'd be married now if it wasn't for that old woman. Made such a fuss when Mary mentioned it."

The shopkeeper was nodding her head, agreeing. "Wasn't going to be left on her own, wasn't going to move, didn't want anybody else in the house. I know what I'd have told her."

"But you're not Mary, Mrs. Groves."

"Indeed I am not."

They watched through the window as the bank door opened and the teacher disappeared inside.

"Poor Mary," said Mrs. Spencer. "She can't stand up to her mother. Never could."

In the lane the two children stopped running.

"It ain't no good," said Ron. "He ain't coming, not today."

"I don't mind," said Sally.

"You ain't afraid of dyin' are you?"

"Not after what Miss Mary Birdsall said, I ain't. It was that Wayne. He made me frit."

Ron gave her hand a jerk of annoyance and imitated her lisp. "Miss Mary Birdsall. You don't say a teacher's whole name when you talk about her. She's just Miss."

"But I like Miss Mary Birdsall. She ain't very happy."

"She ain't supposed to be happy, is she? She's a teacher."

"She have sad eyes. She would cry if anything was to happen to us."

"I should think everybody would." They stood together, hand in hand, and looked out over the low cliff. "They wouldn't like it if two kids was to die."

They listened to the mournful suck of the sea below and for a moment felt the lonely luxury of slipping out of the world.

"I seen her crying once, Ron. She come out of her house and she could hardly see me her eyes was so brimful. And you know what she done?"

"How do I know? I wasn't there was I?"

"She picked me up and kissed me. She almost squeezed the life out of me. Why do you reckon she done that when she was crying?" Ron shrugged and did not answer. "Anyway, that's why I like Miss Mary Birdsall."

Her brother listened for a few seconds to the dull clap of the waves then said, "Anyway she put that Wayne in his place when he was going on about Old Shuck didn't she? She say that black dogs sometimes bring good luck. If they're ghosts, that is."

"Our dog ain't a ghost, though."

I listen. In the field's dark furrows my pelt is invisible. Their fingers have felt my coat and tugged at my neck. They have dealt with the Death-Dealer and there is no going back.

A single light in a green shade shone over his desk in the back, but they stood at a little distance and in shadow near the counter where all day he had been counting money to and fro through the brass grille.

"For ever, Mary? Does this go on for ever?" He had drawn away from her, and his hand rested on the counter as though waiting for some document in a transaction. "Our lives are running away."

She knew that. Daily, in the mirror, she had seen the dark shadow under her eyes increasing and the edge of her lips beginning to blur with tiny wrinkles. "Even my clothes." Her thoughts burst into words that were almost a cry. "Look at me. Jumper and skirt. Every day the same. Oh!"

"Mary," he said. At one time, when he spoke as softly as now, he would have reached for her and, clinging together, they would have ridden out the anguish. But this time he had made no move. "She's got to let you go. You've got to leave her."

"I can't!"

He was a quiet man. The thin brown face, handsome at most times,

was hollowed now into angular shapes. "She uses you. She's taking your life away, can't you see that?"

"If only you could begin to like her."

He drew in his breath. "She won't even see me, Mary. How many more times do we try?"

"But . . ." And then she looked down. They had each rested a hand on the counter, but their fingers were curled, not touching. There was a space of polished wood between them and she could not cross it. All she could do was slide her hand back. She did so and turned away. "She relies on me. I can't leave her."

Seen through the moisture of her eyes the floor was uncertain and she almost stumbled. He saw the awkwardness in her, but desperation gave him grim cruelty and he let her open the door and go out without calling her back.

Mrs. Groves pressed the keys on her cash register and watched the little electronic figures flicker, doing her sums for her. It's a boon, she thought for the millionth time; I would have thought this was magic when I was at school.

"There she goes." Mrs. Spencer had seen Mary coming out of the bank, and was simpering slyly at the thought of what had been happening inside. "That never took long."

Mrs. Groves took her eyes from the magic figures. "She do have her head bowed low, don't she?"

Mary went by as though rain was beating into her face, and the smile faded on Mrs. Spencer's lips. "She's crying, that's what she's doing. What have he said to her? What have he done?"

They watched her go by without being properly able to glimpse her face, then the shopkeeper said, "Well at least she's going home and not the other way."

"What do you mean, Mrs. Groves?"

"I've seen that girl looking so miserable at times," Mrs. Groves was shaking her head, "that when she wanders down toward the sea I wonder whether she isn't going to do something really silly."

The lane along the cliff bent away out of sight, and the thin sea mist put cold hands to their cheeks and foreheads.

"There ain't much point in going no further," said Ron. "He ain't coming to see us today." His sister's fingers lay quite still inside his hand in his pocket, and for some time she had walked steadily in silence. He glanced sideways and saw that her face was serious. Her small legs must

be getting tired. "I reckon we've gone far enough, Sally. Time we went back."

"I was thinking about Miss Mary Birdsall," she said.

Her lisp made him tighten his fingers over hers. He wanted to protect her. "What about her?" he said.

"She's so sad I wondered if we could do something to cheer her up."

"What, for instance?"

Her little shoulders rose and fell in a quick shrug. "I don't know."

"Come on, we've got to get back." He turned in the road and the faint breeze pushed droplets into his face that thickened and made him blink just as Sally gripped his hand, tugged it from his pocket and began to drag him forward.

"There he is!" she cried. "I knew he'd come for us."

They had descended a slope to where the clifftop almost touched the beach. Now, as they looked up, they saw the shape on the skyline.

I stand between dull sea silver and the black bank. They see me. Their home hearth is at my back. The one track brings them to my muzzle.

Sally slipped his hand and ran forward. He had not realized the dog was so large. She had to reach above her head to put her arms around its neck.

"He's wet," she said. "He's ever so wet on my face. Look." She turned toward him, rubbing her cheeks in the dog's pelt to pick up the beads of mist hanging there. Her face shone in the pale light as she laughed, and the dog lowered its mask to be level with her, but kept its eyes on the boy.

Her brother's footsteps faltered and she called out, "Hurry up, Ron, we've got to do something."

"What?" He came forward slowly and stood in front of them. The dog's breath smoked across his sister's face, and he wanted to reach forward and coax her fingers from the long hair of its neck, but the brown eyes set deep in the black skull made him, for the first time, afraid. "What have we got to do?"

"Get hold of him, Ron, like I am." She saw him hesitate. "You don't have to be frightened."

Shame at being less daring than his sister made him put his hand forward and touch the dog between the ears. He felt the heavy bone and dug his fingers into the thick hair behind its head.

"It's cold," he said. "Cold all the way inside."

She nodded. Her face was gleaming. "Do you know what I think we

should do?" she asked. He shook his head. "I think we should take the dog to see Miss Mary Birdsall."

The dog's tongue lolled over its black lips and its teeth showed, but it was docile between them and Ron's courage returned.

"It could get warm beside her fire," he said. "She'd like that." But it was the thought of walking through the village street and Wayne Spencer seeing him with the big black shape at his side that was strongest in his mind.

The dog went with them. Sally was no taller than its head but she clung to the hair of its shoulder as though at a tug she could force it to go in any direction she demanded. And all the time she chattered.

"Miss Mary Birdsall will be ever so pleased, Ron. It will make her happy. I know it will. She might be able to keep it." She leant forward as she walked, and looked into its face. "Would you like that? She'll give you a name, I reckon, if you haven't got one. You'd like a name, I expect."

Names made her brother uncomfortable. "Why don't you be quiet?" he said.

Night was coming on fast, and as they entered the village the mist became a drizzle which dissolved the outlines of the houses. Suddenly he no longer wanted to be with the dog that padded between them. "Let it go," he said. "Send it back."

"No!" She raised her voice. "I like him. He's Old Shuck."

"Don't say that!" He had thrust his head forward, turning to say more, but his words were choked off as the dog stopped suddenly and raised its head.

It was then that they heard the footsteps. Coming along the street, one hand holding her coat collar closed against the drizzle, was the teacher.

Sally tugged at the dog and tried to urge it forward. "Miss!" she called out. "Miss Mary Birdsall!"

Mary heard her just as she was about to turn into the gateway of her cottage. She paused, frowning slightly, not wanting her thoughts to be disturbed, but Sally called again and she took her hand from the latch.

"Sally," she said, surprised to see the two children. "And Ron Stibbard. You're soaking, the pair of you. You'd better get home and get those wet things off."

At the sound of her voice the dog moved forward and they went with it to stand in front of her. She looked down at them and they saw that the blue of her eyes seemed to have widened with the moisture on her face.

"Miss," said Sally, and fell silent, suddenly shy.

Ron had to speak. "We thought we'd like to give you something," he

said in a rush, and was going to go on, but the cottage door opened and distracted them.

“Mary!” The voice was peevish. “What you doing standing out there with them kids? I been waiting ages.”

“Just a minute, Mother. They want to tell me something.”

“Can’t you see them in the morning? If I stand here any longer I’ll catch me death.” She turned her back and waddled inside.

It was then, with their hands resting on its back, that they felt the dog’s pelt roughen. They glanced quickly down and saw its head lowered as though it was about to charge. They clenched their fingers in its stiff, black hair, half afraid it would turn on them, but it moved forward and slid easily from their grasp.

They watched it pad through the garden to the open door, push it wider as though it already belonged there, and disappear into the shadows inside. They were listening for a shriek of alarm or anger from the old woman but no sound came, and Mary’s voice made them turn toward her, away from the blank doorway.

“You were going to tell me something,” she said, and waited for an answer.

“It was only about the dog,” said Ron.

“What dog?”

He opened his mouth to speak, but as he looked directly into her eyes he saw that she did not know what he meant. The huge dog had stood between them but she had not seen it.

It was Sally’s lisp that broke the silence. “Miss Mary Birdsall,” she said.

Mary could not prevent herself smiling at the small, solemn face turned up toward her. “Yes?” she said.

“We brought him along to see you so you wouldn’t be sad.”

“Who?”

“Old Shuck,” said Sally.

Her brother was embarrassed and jerked at her hand to silence her. “It’s nothing, Miss,” he said, and began to retreat, pulling Sally with him.

Mary watched them turn away slowly and then, free of her, suddenly break into a run and disappear along the road, hand in hand.

I stand still in the room. Far outside, footsteps flee. They need not fear. I deal death where I will. I lift my muzzle and am door height. Fire-coal falls and flares, and in the heat of the hearth the old one watches. She sees. My pelt steams. In her face, fear flickers and I come closer. She feels my breath in her face, fails to fight free, and in a gasp is gone.





## Dinner Party

Gardner Dozois

*Gardner Dozois was born in 1947 in Salem, Massachusetts, where he grew up ice-skating on Gallows Hill. Now a resident of Philadelphia, Dozois is the author or editor of sixteen books, including the novel Strangers, and The Visible Man, a collection of his short fiction. He also edits the annual series, The Year's Best Science Fiction. His short fiction has appeared in Playboy, Penthouse, Omni, and a great many science fiction magazines and anthologies. His critical work has appeared in Writer's Digest, Starship, Thrust, Science Fiction Chronicle, Writing and Selling Science Fiction, and Science Fiction Writers, and he is the author of the critical chapbook, The Fiction of James Tiptree, Jr. His forthcoming books include The Year's Best Science Fiction, Second Annual Collection for Bluejay Books and a series of anthologies in collaboration with Jack Dann for Ace Books: Magicats, Mermaids, Bestiary, Sorcerers, and Demons.*

*Dozois often writes in collaboration with one or both of his friends Jack Dann and Michael Swanwick. A story by the three of them, "Touring," was featured in The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series X; one critic judged it to be the best story ever published in this series. However, Gardner Dozois can do quite well on his own, as this cheerful tale demonstrates.*

IT HAD BEEN COLD all that afternoon. When they picked Hassmann up at the gate that evening it was worse than cold—it was freezing.

The gate guard let Hassmann wait inside the guard booth, although that was technically against regulations, and he might have caught hell for it if the Officer of the Day had come by. But it was colder than a witch's tit outside, as the guard put it, and he knew Hassmann slightly, and liked him, even though he was RA and Hassmann was National Guard, and he thought that most NGs were chickenshit. But he liked Hassmann. Hassmann was a good kid.

They huddled inside the guard booth, sharing a cigarette, talking desultorily about baseball and women, about a court-martial in the gate

guard's battalion, about the upcoming ATTs and MOS tests, about the scarcity of promotion slots for corporals and 5s. They carefully did not talk about the incident last weekend on the campus in Morgantown, although it had been all over the papers and the TV and had been talked about all over post. They also didn't talk about where Hassmann was going tonight—allowed offbase at a time when almost everyone else's passes had been pulled—although rumors about that had spread through the grapevine with telegraphic speed since Hassmann's interview with Captain Simes early that afternoon. Most especially, most emphatically, they did not talk about what everyone knew but hesitated to admit even in whispers: that by this time next month, they would probably be at war.

The gate guard was telling some long, rambling anecdote about breaking up a fight down behind the Armor mess hall when he looked out beyond Hassmann's shoulder and fell silent, his face changing. "This looks like your ride heah, Jackson," he said, quietly, after a pause.

Hassmann watched the car sweep in off the road and stop before the gate; it was a big black Caddy, the post floodlights gleaming from a crust of ice over polished steel and chrome. "Yeah," Hassmann said. His throat had suddenly turned dry, and his tongue bulked enormously in his mouth. He ground the cigarette butt out against the wall. The guard opened the door of the booth to let him out. The cold seized him with his first step outside, seized him and shook him like a dog shaking a rat. "Cover your ass," the gate guard said suddenly from the booth behind him. "Remember—cover your *own* ass, you heah?" Hassmann nodded, without looking around, without much conviction. The guard grunted, and slid the booth door closed.

Hassmann was alone.

He began to trot toward the car, slipping on a patch of ice, recovering easily. Hoarfrost glistened everywhere, over everything, and the stars were out in their chill armies, like the million icy eyes of God. The cold air was like ice in his lungs, and his breath steamed in white tatters around him. The driver of the car had the right front door half open, waiting for him, but Hassmann—seeing that the man had a woman with him, and feeling a surge of revulsion at the thought of sitting pressed close to the couple in the front—opened the rear door instead and slipped into the back seat. After a moment, the driver shrugged and closed the front door. Hassmann closed the rear door too, automatically pushed down the little button that locked it, instantly embarrassed that he had done so. After the double *thunk* of the doors closing and the sharp *click* of the lock, there was nothing but a smothering silence.

The driver turned around in his seat, resting his arm on the top of the seatback, staring at Hassmann. In the dark, it was hard to make out his features, but he was a big, beefy man, and Hassmann could see the reptilian glint of light from thick, horn-rimmed glasses. The woman was still facing forward, only casting a quick, furtive glance back at him, and then turning her head away again. Even in this half-light, Hassmann could see the stiffness of her shoulders, the taut way she held her neck. When the silence had become more than uncomfortable, Hassmann stammered, "Sir, I'm—sir, PFC Hassmann, sir . . ."

The driver shifted his weight in the front seat. Leather creaked and moaned. "Glad to meet you, son," he said. "Yes, very glad—a pleasure, yes, a pleasure." There was a forced joviality in his voice, a note of strained, dangerous cordiality that Hassmann decided he had better not try to argue with.

"Glad to meet you, too, sir," Hassmann croaked.

"Thank you, son," the man said. Leather groaned again as he extended his hand into the back seat. Hassmann shook it briefly, released it—the man's hand had been damp and flabby, like a rubber glove full of oatmeal. "I'm Dr. Wilkins," the man said. "And this is my wife, Fran." His wife did not acknowledge the introduction, continuing to stare stonily straight ahead. "Manners," Dr. Wilkins said in a soft, cottony voice, almost a whisper. "Manners!" Mrs. Wilkins jumped as if she had been slapped, and then dully muttered, "Charmed," still not turning to look at Hassmann.

Dr. Wilkins stared at his wife for a moment, then turned to look at Hassmann again; his glasses were dully gleaming blank circles, like opaque portholes. "What's your *Christian* name, son?"

Hassmann shifted uneasily in his seat. After a moment's hesitation—as though to speak his name would be to give the other man power over him—he said, "James, sir. James Hassmann."

"I'll call you Jim, then," Dr. Wilkins said. It was a statement of fact—he was not asking permission; nor was there any question that Hassmann would be expected to continue to call him "Dr. Wilkins," however free the older man made himself with Hassmann's "Christian name." Or "sir," Hassmann thought with a quick flash of resentment, you could hardly go wrong calling him "sir." Hassmann had been in the Army long enough to know that it was impossible to say "sir" too many times when you were talking to a man like this; work it in a hundred times per sentence, they'd like it just fine.

Dr. Wilkins was still staring reflectively at him, as if he expected some sort of response, an expression of gratitude for the fine democratic spirit

he was showing, perhaps . . . but Hassmann said nothing. Dr. Wilkins grunted. "Well, then—Jim," he said. "You like continental cuisine?"

"I—I'm not sure, sir," Hassmann said. He could feel his face flushing with embarrassment in the close darkness of the cab. "I'm not sure I know what it is."

Dr. Wilkins made a noise that was not quite a snort—a long, slow, resigned exhaling of air through the nose. "What kind of food do you like to eat at home?"

"Well, sir, the usual king of thing, I guess. Nothing special."

"What kind of things?" Dr. Wilkins said with heavy, elaborated patience.

"Oh—spaghetti, meat loaf. Sometimes fried chicken, or cold cuts. We had TV dinners a lot." Dr. Wilkins was staring at him; it was too dark to make out his expression with any kind of certainty, but he seemed to be staring blankly, incredulously, as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Sometimes my mother'd make, you know, a roast for Sunday or something, but she didn't like to cook anything fancy like that."

This time Dr. Wilkins did snort, a sharp, impatient sound. "*Adeo in teneris consuescere multum est,*" he said in a loud, portentous voice, and shook his head. Hassmann felt his face burning again; he had no idea what Dr. Wilkins had said, but there was no mistaking the scorn behind the words. "That's Virgil," Dr. Wilkins said contemptuously, peering significantly at Hassmann. "You know Virgil?"

"Sir?" Hassmann said.

"Never mind," Dr. Wilkins muttered. After a heavy pause, he said, "This restaurant we're taking you to tonight has a three-star Michelin rating, one of the few places east of the Mississippi River that does, outside of New York City. I don't suppose that means anything to you, either, does it?"

"No, sir," Hassmann said stiffly. "I'm afraid it doesn't, sir."

Dr. Wilkins snorted again. Hassmann saw that Mrs. Wilkins was watching him in the rear view mirror, but as soon as their eyes met, she turned her face away.

"Well, son," Dr. Wilkins was saying, "I'll tell you *one* thing those three Michelin stars mean: they mean that tonight you're going to get the best damn meal you ever had." He sniffed derisively. "Maybe the best damn meal you'll *ever* have. Do you understand *that* . . . Jim?"

"Yes, sir," Hassmann said. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Mrs. Wilkins was watching him in the rear view mirror again. Every time she thought that his attention was elsewhere, she would stare at him with terrible fixed intensity; she would look away when he met her

eyes in the mirror, but a moment later, as soon as he glanced away, she would be staring at him again, as though she couldn't keep her eyes off him, as though he were something loathsome and at the same time almost hypnotically fascinating, like a snake or a venomous insect.

"I don't expect you to appreciate the finer points," Dr. Wilkins said, "we can thank the way kids are brought up today for *that*, but I do expect you to appreciate that what you're getting tonight is a very fine meal, one of the finest meals money can buy, not some slop from McDonald's."

"Yes, sir, I do, sir," Hassmann said. Dr. Wilkins made a *humpfing* noise, not sounding entirely mollified, so Hassmann added, "It sounds great, sir. I'm really looking forward to it. Thank you, sir." He kept his face blank and his voice level, but his jaw ached with tension. He hated being dressed down like this, he *hated* it. His fingers were turning white where they were gripping the edge of the seat.

Dr. Wilkins stared at him for a moment longer, then sighed and turned back to the wheel; they slid away into the darkness with a smooth surge of acceleration.

They coasted back down the hill, turned right. Here the road ran parallel to the tall cyclone fence that surrounded the base; behind the iron mesh, behind the winter-striped skeletons of trees, Hassmann could see the high, cinder-bed roofs of the Infantry barracks, a huge water tower—it had the slogan RE-UP ARMY stenciled on its sides, visible for miles in the daytime—and the gaunt silhouette of a derrick, peaking up over the fence from the Engineer motor pool like the neck of some fantastic metal giraffe. The base dwindled behind them to a table-top miniature, to a scene the size of a landscape inside a tiny glass snowball, and then it was gone, and there was nothing but the stuffy interior of the car, the pale glow of the instruments on the dashboard, dark masses of trees rushing by on either side. Hassmann was sweating heavily, in spite of the cold, and the upholstery was sticky under his hands.

There was a faint but persistent scent of patchouli in the car—cutting across the new-car smell of the upholstery and the tobacco-and-English-Leather smell of Dr. Wilkins—that must be Mrs. Wilkins' perfume; it was a heavy, oversweet smell that reminded Hassmann of the room in the cancer hospital where his aunt had died. He longed to roll down the window, let the cold night air into the stuffy car, but he didn't quite dare to do it without asking Dr. Wilkins' permission, and that was something he wouldn't do. He was beginning to get a headache, a bright needle of pain that probed in alongside his eyeball like a stiff wire, and his stomach was sick and knotted with tension. Abruptly it was too much for him, and he found himself blinking back sudden tears of frustration and rage,

all the resentment and chagrin he felt rising up in his throat like bile. Why did he have to do this? Why did they have to pick on *him*? Why couldn't they just leave him *alone*? He had said as much in Captain Simes' office this afternoon, blurting out, "I don't want to do it! Do I *have* to go, sir?" And Captain Simes had studied him with jaundiced eye for a moment before replying, "Officially, no. The regulations say we can't make you. Unofficially, though, I can tell you that Dr. Wilkins is a very important man in this state, and with things as tense as they are politically, you can expect some very serious smoke to be brought down on your ass if you don't do everything you can to keep him happy, short of dropping your drawers and bending over." And then Simes had leered at him with his eroded, prematurely old face and said, "And, hell, soldier, comes right down *to* it, maybe you even ought to take *that* under advisement . . ."

They drifted past a weathered wooden barn that was covered with faded old Clabber Girl and Jesus Saves signs, past a dilapidated farmhouse where one light was burning in an upstairs window. There was an automobile up on blocks in the snow-covered front yard, its engine hanging suspended from a rope thrown over a tree branch. Scattered automobile parts made hummocks in the snow, as if small dead animals were buried there. They turned past a bullet-riddled highway sign and onto an old state road that wound down out of the foothill country. The car began to pick up speed, swaying slightly on its suspension.

"You come from around here, Jim?" Dr. Wilkins said.

"No, sir," Hassmann said. *Thank God!* he added silently to himself. Evidently he had been unable to keep his feelings out of his voice, because Dr. Wilkins glanced quizzically at him in the rear view mirror. Quickly, Hassmann added, "I was born in Massachusetts, sir. A small town near Springfield."

"That so?" Dr. Wilkins said, without interest. "Gets pretty cold up there too in the winter, doesn't it? So at least you're used to this kind of weather, right?"

"That's right, sir," Hassmann said leadenly. "It gets pretty cold there, too."

Dr. Wilkins grunted. Even he seemed to realize that his attempt at small talk had been a dismal failure, for he lapsed into a sodden silence. He pressed down harder on the accelerator, and the dark winter countryside began to blur by outside the windows. Now that they had stopped talking, there was no sound except for the whine of the tires on macadam or their snaredrum rattle on patches of gravel.

Hassmann rubbed his sweating palms against the slick upholstery.

Somehow he knew that Mrs. Wilkins was watching him again, although it was too dark to see her eyes in the mirror any more. Occasionally the lights of an oncoming car would turn the inside of the windshield into a reflective surface, and he would be able to see her plainly for a second, a thin-faced woman with tightly pursed lips, her hands clenched together in her lap, staring rigidly straight ahead of her. Then the light would fade and her image would disappear, and only then, in the darkness, would he begin to *feel* her eyes watching him again, as though she were only able to see him in the dark . . . .

They were going faster and faster now, careening down the old state road like a moonshiner on a delivery run with the Alcohol Tax agents on his tail, and Hassmann was beginning to be afraid, although he did his best to sit still and look imperturbable. The old roadbed was only indifferently maintained, and every bump rattled their teeth in spite of the Caddy's heavy-duty shocks; once Hassmann was bounced high enough to bang his head on the roof, and the car was beginning to sway ominously from side to side. Fortunately, they were on a level stretch of road with no oncoming traffic with they hit the patch of ice. For a moment or two the Caddy was all over the road, skidding and fishtailing wildly, its brakes screaming and its tires throwing up clouds of black smoke, and then slowly, painfully, Dr. Wilkins brought the big car back under control. They never came to a complete stop, but they had slowed down to about fifteen miles per hour by the time Dr. Wilkins could wrestle them back into their own lane, and you could smell burned rubber even inside the closed cab.

No one spoke; Mrs. Wilkins had not even moved, except to steady herself against the dashboard with one hand, an almost dainty motion. Slowly, almost involuntarily, Dr. Wilkins raised his head to look at Hassmann in the rear view mirror. *Almost lost it, didn't you, old man?* Hassmann thought, staring impassively back at him, and after a moment Dr. Wilkins looked shakily away. They began slowly to pick up speed again, wobbling slightly, although Dr. Wilkins was careful to keep them under fifty this time. This compulsive speeding, obviously pushing himself to or beyond the edge of his driving ability, was the first real indication of strain or tension that Dr. Wilkins had allowed to escape from behind his smooth, hard-lacquered façade, and Hassmann greeted it with interest and a certain degree of vindictiveness.

A few minutes more brought them out of the hills. They slowed down to rattle across a small chain-link bridge over a frozen river. A tank was parked to one side of the road, near the bridge entrance, its hatch open for ventilation, gray smoke panting from its exhaust and rising straight



up into the cold air. A soldier in a steel helmet popped his head up out of the driver's hatch and watched them as they passed. They weren't putting up roadblocks and regulating civilian traffic yet, Hassmann thought, in spite of the recent wave of terrorism, but it obviously wasn't going to be too much longer before they were. There was a small town on the other side of the bridge, half-a-dozen buildings clustered around a crossroads. Political graffiti had been spray-painted on several of the buildings, particularly on the blank-faced side-wall of a boarded-up gas station: YANKEES GO HOME . . . FEDS OUT OF WEST VIRGINIA NOW . . . SECESSION, NOT RECESSION . . . FUCK THE UNION . . . A sloppy, half-hearted attempt to obliterate the graffiti had been made, and only a few letters of each slogan remained, but Hassmann had seen them often enough elsewhere to have little difficulty reconstructing them. The restaurant was a mile beyond the town, a large stone-and-timber building that had once been a grinding mill—now hidden spotlights splashed the ivy-covered walls with pastel lights, and the big wooden waterwheel was sheathed in glistening ice.

There was a network newsvan parked in front of the restaurant, and Dr. Wilkins, who had been anxiously checking his watch on the last stretch from town, grunted in satisfaction when he saw it. As they pulled up, a news crew with a minicam unit climbed out of the van and took up position in front of the restaurant steps. Other reporters got out of their parked cars—pinching out unfinished cigarettes and carefully tucking them away—and began to saunter over as well, some of them slapping themselves on the arms and joking with one another about the cold in low, rapid voices. Hassmann heard one of the reporters laugh, the sound carrying clearly on the cold winter air.

Dr. Wilkins switched off the ignition, and they all sat motionless and silent for a moment, listening to the metallic *ticking* noises the engine made as it cooled. Then, with forced brightness, Dr. Wilkins said, "Well, we're here! Everybody out!" Mrs. Wilkins ignored him. She was staring out at the gathering knot of reporters, and for the first time she seemed shaken, her icy composure broken. "Frank," she said in an unsteady voice, "I—Frank, I just *can't*, I can't face them, I can't—" She was trembling. Dr. Wilkins patted her hand perfunctorily. He noticed Hassmann watching them, and glared at him with murderous resentment, his careful mask slipping for a moment. Hassmann stared stonily back. "It'll be all right, Fran," Dr. Wilkins said, patting her hand again. "It's just until we get inside. Julian promised me that he wouldn't let any of them into the restaurant." Mrs. Wilkins was shaking her head blindly. "It'll only be a minute. Let me do all the talking. It'll be okay, you'll see."

He looked coldly at Hassmann. "Come on," he said brusquely, to Hassmann, and got out of the car. He walked quickly around to the passenger side, opened the door, and said, "Come on" again, to his wife this time, in a low coaxing tone an adult might use to a frightened child. Even so, he had to reach down and half-pull her to her feet before he could get her out of the car. He bent to look at Hassmann again. "You, too," he said in a harsh, dangerous voice. "Come on. Don't give me any trouble now, you little shit. Get out."

Hassmann climbed out of the car. It was colder than ever, and he could feel the clammy sweat drying on his body with a rapidity that made him shiver. Dr. Wilkins came up between him and Mrs. Wilkins and took each of them by the arm; and they began walking toward the restaurant. The reporters were looking toward them now, and the camera lights on the van came on, nearly blinding them.

Dr. Wilkins kept them walking right at the reporters. The small crowd parted and reformed around them, swallowing them, and then it seemed to Hassmann as if everything was happening at once, too fast to follow. Faces jostled around him, faces thrust forward toward him, their mouths opening and closing. Voices gabbled. A reporter was saying, "with the ratification vote on the Act of Secession coming up in the statehouse Wednesday, and similar votes later this week in Michigan, Ohio, and Colorado," and Dr. Wilkins was waving his hand airily and saying, "more than enough support on the floor." Another reporter was saying something to Mrs. Wilkins and she was dully muttering, "I don't know, I don't know . . ." Flashbulbs were popping at them now, and they had climbed part-way up the restaurant steps. Someone was thrusting a microphone into Hassmann's face and bellowing, "make you feel?" and Hassmann was shrugging and shaking his head. Someone else was saying, "latest Gallup poll shows that two-thirds of the people of West Virginia support succession," and Dr. Wilkins was saying, "everything you hear, love?" and the reporters laughed.

Hassmann wasn't listening any more. Ever since last weekend he had been walking around like a somnambulist, and now the feeling had intensified; he felt feverish and unreal, as if everything were happening behind a thin wall of insulating glass, or happening to someone else while he watched. He barely noticed that Dr. Wilkins had stopped walking and was now staring directly into the blinking eye of the minicam, or that the reporters had grown curiously silent. Dr. Wilkins had let his face become serious and somber, and when he spoke this time it was not in the insouciant tone he'd been using a moment before, but in a slow, sincere, gravelly voice. The voice seemed to go on and on and on, while

Hassmann shivered in the cold wind, and then Dr. Wilkins' heavy hand closed over Hassmann's shoulder, and the flashbulbs went off in their faces like summer lightning.

Then Julian was ushering them into the restaurant—fawning shamelessly over Dr. Wilkins and promising to “take their order personally”—and shutting the reporters outside. He led them through the jungly interior of the old mill to a table in a corner nook where the walls were hung with bronze cooking utensils and old farm implements, and then buzzed anxiously around Dr. Wilkins like a fat unctuous bee while they consulted the menu. The menu had no prices, and as far as Hassmann was concerned might just as well have been written in Arabic. Mrs. Wilkins refused to order, or even to speak, and her rigid silence eventually embarrassed even Julian. Impatiently, Dr. Wilkins ordered for all of them—making a point of asking Hassmann, with thinly disguised sarcasm, if the coulibiatic of salmon and the osso bucco would be to his liking—and Julian hurried gratefully away.

Silence settled over the table. Dr. Wilkins stared blankly at Hassmann, who stared blankly back. Mrs. Wilkins seemed to have gone into shock—she was staring down at the table, her body stiffly erect, her hands clenched in her lap, it was hard to tell if she was even breathing. Dr. Wilkins looked at his wife, looked away. Still no one had spoken. “Well, Jim,” Dr. Wilkins started to say with leaden joviality, “I think you'll like—” and then he caught the scorn in the look that Hassmann was giving him, and let the sentence falter to a stop. It had become clear to Hassmann that Dr. Wilkins hated him as much as or more than his wife did—but in spite of that, and in spite of the fact that he had already gotten as much use out of Hassmann as he was going to get, he was too much the politician to be able to stop going through the motions of the charade. Dr. Wilkins locked eyes with Hassmann for a moment, opened his mouth to say something else, closed it again. Abruptly, he looked tired.

A smooth silent waiter placed their appetizers in front of them, glided away again. Slowly, Mrs. Wilkins looked up. She had one of those smooth Barbie-doll faces that enable some women to look thirty when they are fifty, but now her face had harsh new lines in it, as if someone had gone over it with a needle dipped in acid. Moving with the slow-motion grace of someone in a diving suit on the bottom of the sea, she reached out to touch the linen napkin before her on the table. She smiled fondly at it, caressing it with her fingertips. She was staring straight across the table at Hassmann now, but she wasn't seeing him; somewhere on its way across the table, her vision had taken the sort of right-angle turn that

allows you to look directly into the past. “Frank,” she said, in a light, amused, reminiscent tone unlike any that Hassmann had heard her use, “do you remember the time we were having the Graingers over for dinner, back when you were still in city council? And just before they got there I realized that we’d run out of clean napkins?”

“Fran—” Dr. Wilkins said warningly, but she ignored him; she was speaking to Hassmann now, although he was sure that she still wasn’t seeing him *as* Hassmann—he was merely filling the role of listener, one of the many vague someones she’d told this anecdote to, for it was plain that she’d told it many times before. “And so I gave Peter some money and sent him down to the store to quick buy me some napkins, even *paper* ones were better than nothing.” She was smiling now as she spoke. “So after a while he comes back, the Graingers were here by then, and he comes marching solemnly right into the living room where we’re having drinks, and he says—he must have been about five—he says ‘I looked all over the store, Mom, and I got the best ones I could find. These must be really good because they’re *sanitary* ones, see? It says so right on the box.’ And he holds up this great big box of Kotex!” She laughed. “And he looks so intent and serious, and he’s so proud of being a big enough boy to be given a job to do, and he’s trying *so* hard to do it right and please us, I just didn’t have the heart to scold him, even though old Mr. Grainger looked like he’d just swallowed his false teeth, and Frank choked and sprayed his drink all over the room.” Still smiling, still moving languidly, she picked up her fork and dug it into one of the her veal-and-shrimp quenelles, and then she stopped, and her eyes cleared, and Hassmann knew that all at once she was *seeing* him again. Life crashed back into her face with shocking suddenness, like a storm wave breaking over a seawall, flushing it blood-red. Abruptly, spasmodically, viciously, she threw her fork at Hassmann. It bounced off his chest and clattered away across the restaurant floor. Her face had gone white now, as rapidly as it had flushed, and she said, “*I will not eat with the man who murdered my son.*”

Hassmann stood up. He heard his own voice saying, “Excuse me,” in a polite and formal tone, and then he had turned and was walking blindly away across the restaurant, somehow managing not to blunder into any of the other tables. He kept walking until a rough-hewn door popped up in front of him, and then he pushed through it, and found himself in the washroom.

It was cold and dim and silent in the washroom, and the air smelled of cold stone and dust and antiseptic, and, faintly, of ancient piss. The only sound was the low rhythmic belching and gurgling of cisterns. A jet

of freezing air was coming in through a crack in the window molding, and it touched Hassmann's skin like a needle.

He moved to the porcelain washbasin and splashed cold water over his face, the way they do in the movies, but it made him feel worse instead of better. He shivered. Automatically, he wet a tissue and began to scrub at the food stain that Mrs. Wilkins' fork had left on his cheap pin-striped suit. He kept catching little glimpses of himself in the tarnished old mirror over the washbasin, and he watched himself slyly, fascinated without ever looking at himself straight on. They had *film* footage of his killing the Wilkins boy—that particular stretch of film had been shown over and over again on TV since last weekend. As the demonstrators rushed up the steps of the campus Administration building toward the line of waiting Guardsmen, there was a very clear sequence of his bringing his rifle up and shooting Peter Wilkins down. Other Guardsmen had fired, and other demonstrators had fallen—four dead and three others seriously wounded, all told—but there could be no doubt that *he* was the one who had killed Peter Wilkins. Yes, that one was *his*, all right.

He leaned against the wall, pressing his forehead against the cold stone, feeling the stones suck the warmth from his flesh. For some reason he found himself thinking about the duck he'd raised, one of the summers they still went to the farm—the duck they'd wryly named Dinner. He'd fattened that stupid duck all summer, and then when it was time to kill it, he'd barely been able to bring himself to do it. He'd made a botch of cutting its head off, faltered on the first stroke and then had to slash two more times to get the job done. And then the duck had run headless across the farmyard, spouting blood, and he'd had to chase it down. He'd given it to his father to clean, and then gone off behind the barn to throw up. All the rest of the family had said that the duck was delicious, but he'd had to leave the table several times during the meal to throw up again. How his father had laughed at him!

Hassmann was shivering again, and he couldn't seem to make himself stop. As clearly as if it was really in the room with him, he heard Captain Simes' voice saying, "He's mousetrapped himself into it! His son was one of the ringleaders in planning the campus rally, and he was getting a lot of local media coverage simply because he *was* Wilkins' son. So, just before the rally that weekend, Wilkins published an open letter in all the major papers—" Dr. Wilkins' voice, resonant and sonorous as he stares into the camera lights:—"in that letter, I told my son that if he were killed while taking part in a riot that he himself had helped to create . . . well, I told him that I would mourn him forever, but that far from condemning the man who killed him, I'd seek that man out and shake his hand, and

then take him out to dinner to thank him for having the steadfastness to uphold the Constitution of the United States in the face of armed sedition—' And so now he's stuck with *doing* it, or losing what little face he has left!" Simes' voice again. Simes' giggle.

He'd talked to Simes for nearly twenty minutes before he'd realized that the tall glass of "iced tea" in Simes' hand was actually 100-proof whiskey, and by that time Simes had been glassy-eyed and swaying, mumbling, "A civil war! And none of this nuclear-exchange shit, either. They're going to fight this one house to house through every small town in America. A nice *long war* . . ."

Hassmann stared at himself in the mirror. His face was hard and drawn, gaunt, his cheeks hollowed. His eyes were pitiless and cold. He could not recognize himself. The stranger in the mirror stared unwinkingly back at him; his face was like stone, the kind of cold and ancient stone that sucks the heat from anything that touches it.

*A nice long war . . .*

He went back into the restaurant. Heads turned surreptitiously to watch him as he passed, and he could see some of the other diners leaning close to each other to whisper and stare. Dr. Wilkins was sitting alone at the table, surrounded by untouched dishes of food, some of them still faintly steaming. As Hassmann came up, he raised his head, and they exchanged bleak stares. He had taken his glasses off, and his face looked doughy and naked without them, less assured, less commanding. His eyes looked watery and tired.

"Julian is letting Mrs. Wilkins lie down in back for a while," Dr. Wilkins said. "Until she feels a little better." Hassmann said nothing, and made no attempt to sit down. Dr. Wilkins reached out for his glasses, put them on, and then peered at Hassmann again, as if to make sure that he was talking to the right man. He drew himself up in his chair a little, glancing at the nearest table with a motion of the eyes so quick as to be nearly imperceptible, like the flick of a lizard's tongue. Was he worried that, in spite of Julian's promise, some of the other customers might be reporters with hidden directional mikes? Some of them might be, at that. "I guess I owe you an apology," Dr. Wilkins said heavily, after a pause. He worked his mouth as if he was tasting something unpleasant, and then continued to speak in a stiff, reluctant voice. "My wife's been under a lot of emotional strain lately. She was distraught. You'll have to make allowances for that. She doesn't realize how hard this has been on you, too, how unpleasant it must have been for you to be forced to take a human life—"

"No, sir," Hassmann said in a clear, distinct voice, interrupting, not

knowing what words he was speaking until he heard them leave his lips . . . feeling the final insulating thickness of glass shatter as he spoke and all the raw emotional knowledge he'd been trying to deny for more than a week rush in upon him . . . knowing even as he spoke that speaking these words would change him irrevocably forever . . . change Dr. Wilkins . . . change everything . . . watching Dr. Wilkins' face, already wincing at the blow he could sense coming . . . seeing the headless duck run flapping through the dusty farmyard . . . his father laughing . . . Mrs. Wilkins' eyes, watching him in the rear view mirror, in the dark . . . the soldier popping his head up out of the tank hatch to watch them pass . . . FUCK THE UNION . . . a nice *long* war . . . the hard, merciless eyes of the stranger in the mirror, the stranger that was now *him* . . . remembering the clean, exhilarating rush of joy, the fierce leap of the heart, as he'd emptied the clip of his semi-automatic rifle into the onrushing figure, relishing the flaring blue fire and the smoke and the noise, *got you, you bastard, got you*, smashing the other man and flinging him aside in a tangle of broken limbs all in one godlike moment, with a flick of his finger

.....

"No, sir," he said, smiling bleakly at the tired old man, enunciating each word with terrible precision, not even, at the end, wanting to hurt the other man, but simply to make him *understand*. "I enjoyed it," he said.

# Tiger In the Snow

Daniel Wynn Barber

*Daniel Wynn Barber was born in Long Beach, California, on December 7, 1947. He grew up in the Midwest, where "Tiger in the Snow" takes its setting. Drafted in 1967, he served in Vietnam, where he was wounded in 1969. His wounds required two years of treatment at Fitzsimmons Army Hospital in Denver. Barber was so taken with the city that he settled there. He and his wife, Patricia, have a brand new son, Sean Wesley.*

*Barber's fascination with horror has led him to create "The Fantasy Puppet Ensemble," a troupe that presents benefit shows every Halloween. "Tiger in the Snow" is his second published story. Other stories include "Light Innocence" in The Minnesotan Science Fiction Reader and "Wings of the Hunter" in a forthcoming anthology of horror from the publishers of Space and Time. Barber has also "banged out a 600 page science fiction/supernatural novel."*

JUSTIN SENSED THE tiger as soon as he reached the street. He didn't see it, or hear it. He simply . . . sensed it.

Leaving the warm safety of the Baxters' porch light behind him, he stared down the sidewalk that fronted State Street, feeling the night swallow him in a single hungry gulp. He stopped when he reached the edge of the Baxters' property line and looked back wistfully toward their front door.

Too bad the evening had to end. It had been just about the finest evening he could remember. Not that Steve and he hadn't had some fine old times together, the way best friends will; but this particular evening had been, well, magical. They had played *The Shot Brothers* down in Steve's basement while Mr. and Mrs. Baxter watched TV upstairs. When the game had been going well and everything was clicking, Justin could almost believe that Steve and he really were brothers. And that feeling had never been stronger than it had been this evening.

When Mrs. Baxter had finally called down that it was time to go, it



had struck Justin as vaguely strange that she would be packing him off on a night like this, seeing how he and Steve slept over at one another's homes just about every weekend. But this evening was different. Despite the snow, home called to him in sweet siren whispers.

Mrs. Baxter had bundled him up in his parka, boots, and mittens, and then, much to his surprise, she had kissed his cheek. Steve had seen him to the door, said a quick goodbye, then hurried away to the den. Funny thing, Steve's eyes had seemed moist.

Then Justin had stepped out into the night, and Mrs. Baxter had closed the door behind him, leaving him alone with the dark and the cold and . . . the tiger.

At the edge of the Baxters' property, Justin glanced around for a glimpse of the beast; but the street appeared deserted save for the houses and parked cars under a downy blanket of fresh snow. It was drifting down lazily now, indifferent after the heavy fall of that afternoon. Justin could see the skittering flakes trapped within the cones of light cast by the street lamps, but otherwise the black air seemed coldly empty. The line of lamps at every corner of State Street gave the appearance of a tunnel of light that tapered down to nothingness; and beyond that tunnel, the dark pressed eagerly in.

For a moment, Justin felt the urge to scurry back to the Baxters' door and beg for sanctuary, but he knew he should be getting home. Besides, he wasn't some chicken who ran from the dark. He was one of the Shot Brothers. Rough and ready. Fearless. Hadn't he proven that to stupid Dale Corkland just the other day? "You scared?" old zit-faced Corkland had asked him. And Justin had shown him.

At the corner, Justin looked both ways, although he knew there wouldn't be many cars out on a night like this. Then he scanned the hedges along a nearby house, where dappled shadows hung frozen in the branches. Excellent camouflage for a tiger—particularly one of those white, Siberian tigers he'd read about.

He kept a close eye on those hedges as he crossed the street. Snow swelled up around his boots and sucked at his feet, making it impossible to run should a tiger spring from behind the mailbox on the far corner. He stopped before he reached that mailbox, listening for the low blowing sound that tigers sometimes make as they lie in ambush. But all he heard was the rasping of his own breath. ("You scared?") Yes. Tigers were nothing to be trifled with. They were as dangerous as the ice on Shepherd's Pond.

Justin had stared at that ice, thinking about the warm weather they'd

had the past week. Then he had looked up at Dale Corkland's face, three years older than his and sporting a gala display of acne. "You scared?" And Justin had shown him.

But that was then and this was now; and weren't tigers more merciless than ice? Oh, yes indeed.

Justin gave himself a good mental shaking. He tried to summon those things his father had told him at other times when this tiger-fear had come upon him. (*Don't be such a baby.*) At night, when he would awaken screaming after a tiger nightmare. (*It was only a dream.*) Or when he felt certain that a tiger was lurking about the basement. (*There are no tigers in the city. You only find tigers in the zoo.*)

Wrapping himself snug in these assurances, Justin tramped past the brick retaining wall at the corner of State and Sixteenth without so much as a glance toward the spidery line of poplars where a tiger might be hiding. He rounded the corner and marched on. Heck, he had walked this way dozens of times. Hundreds, maybe.

But tonight the usually comfortable features seemed alien and warped out of reality under the snow, and finding himself in this strange white landscape, Justin suddenly felt the tiger-fear return. It bobbed up and down within him until he could almost feel the tiger's nearness, so close that the hot jungle breath seemed to huff against his cheek.

He was halfway down the block when he saw a shadow slip effortlessly from behind the house two doors up. It seemed to glide dreamlike across the snow, then disappear behind a car parked in the driveway. It was just a shadow, but before it had vanished, Justin thought he caught a hint of striping.

*There are no tigers in the city.*

Justin watched and waited—waited for whatever it was to show itself. He even considered turning back, rerouting around Rush Street, but that would put *it* behind him.

Come on, he scolded himself. You only find tigers in India. Or the zoo. *Or behind parked cars.* Nonsense. Tigers don't stalk kids from behind parked cars in the middle of an American city. Only little kids let themselves be scared by shadows in the night. Not one of the Shot Brothers. Not a kid who had dared the ice on Shepherd's Pond. Not a kid who was only two years away from attending Rathburn Junior High, where you get to keep your stuff in your own locker and change classrooms every hour and eat your lunch out on the bleachers. Kids at Rathburn didn't go whimpering and whining because they saw a shadow in the snow—probably thrown by a branch moving in the wind.

*But there is no wind tonight.*

Justin swallowed hard, then started forward. He walked slowly, never shifting his gaze from the taillight of that parked car. If only he could see around it without getting any nearer. If something were crouching back there, it would be on him before he could cover the first five feet. And then . . .

. . . teeth and claws, tearing and slashing.

*You scared?*

You bet.

When he had drawn even with the driveway across the street, Justin stopped. Two more steps, maybe three, and he would see if his father and the kids at Rathburn Junior were right, or if tigers do indeed lie in wait on winter streets. Of course, there was still time to turn back.

Perhaps it was the idea of turning back that propelled him forward. If he were to retrace his steps, he would never know; but if he looked and saw no tiger behind that car, then the tiger-fear would be banished, and he wouldn't see them anywhere. Not in bushes. Not behind trees. Not between houses. Just three steps, and he could lay tigers to rest forever.

Justin took those three steps the way he had walked out onto the ice on Shepherd's pond. Old zit-faced Corkland had dared him, and he had faced it.

One—two—three.

He turned and looked.

Nothing. Nothing behind that car but an old coaster wagon lying on its side. No tigers. No lions, bears, werewolves, or boogie-men. Just an old wagon. His father had been right all along.

He covered the last block and a half with steps as light and carefree as those of a June day, when the air smelled of new-mown grass and the sun baked your skin brown. But, of course, it wasn't June, and as he sprinted up his porch steps Justin realized that he had reached home without a moment to spare. He could scarcely see his breath at all. Much longer out in the icy cold and he thought his lungs might have frozen solid.

As he stepped into the familiar warmth of his own house, he heard voices coming from the living room. It sounded as though his folks were having a party, although the voices seemed rather subdued—much the way they sounded on bridge nights when the evenings began quietly, but noised up as the hours grew old.

Justin tip-toed down the hall, thinking it wise not to interrupt. And as he passed the living room, he caught a snatch of conversation. It was a man speaking, “. . . bound to happen eventually. They should have put up a fence years ago. I've a good mind to . . .”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Gordon,” a woman said. (It sounded like Aunt Phyllis.) “This isn’t the time.”

That was all he heard before hurrying to his room.

When he flipped on the light, he was greeted by all the treasures which reflected his short life in intimate detail. The Darth Vader poster, the Packers pennant, the Spitfire on his dresser, the bedspread decorated in railroad logos.

And one new addition, sitting in the corner on great feline haunches.

For the briefest instant, Justin felt the urge to run—to flee into the living room and hurl himself into his mother’s arms, as he had done so many times in the past. But as he stared transfixed into the tiger’s huge, emerald eyes, he felt the fear slipping from him like some dark mantle, to be replaced by the soft and gentle cloak of understanding.

“It’s time to go, isn’t it?” he said in a voice that was low, but unwavering.

The tiger’s eyes remained impassive, as deep and silent as green forest pools. Warm pools that never froze over, the way Shepherd’s Pond did.

In his mind, Justin heard again the pistol crack of ice giving way beneath him, and he felt the chill water closing over his head. It really hadn’t hurt that much, not the way he would have thought. Not much pain, just a moment of remorse when he realized he wouldn’t be seeing his folks any more—or Steve . . .

*. . . had it all been a dream, this last wonderful evening together with Steve? Would Steve even remember?*

Justin looked at the tiger, searching its peaceful face for the answer; but those fathomless eyes kept their secrets.

“Did you follow me tonight?” Justin asked.

Whiskers twitched as the tiger’s muzzle wrinkled into a slight grin.

“Yes,” Justin said softly. “I thought it was you. You’ve been following me all my life, haven’t you?” He turned to close his bedroom door, and when he turned back, the tiger was crouching to spring.



## Watch the Birdie

Ramsey Campbell

*Ramsey Campbell has become an institution in The Year's Best Horror Stories, having appeared in every volume but one—and under three different editors. This seems altogether fitting, considering that since his appearance in Series I, Ramsey Campbell has become an institution in the horror genre as a whole. As novelist, short story writer, anthologist, and critic, Campbell has solidly established himself to be the best writer working in this field today. An early protégé of August Derleth, Campbell was eighteen when Arkham House published his first book of horror stories, The Inhabitant of the Lake & Less Welcome Tenants. Since then Campbell has moved on to chill his readers with such novels as The Face That Must Die, The Parasite, The Nameless, and Incarnate. His most recent books include a novel, Obsession, and a collection of his short fiction, Cold Print. He is now at work on “a large supernatural novel” entitled The Hungry Moon.*

*Born in Liverpool on January 4, 1946, Ramsey Campbell is fond of using his native city as a source for his particular brand of horror. At present he and his wife and two children live in Merseyside in “an enormous turn-of-the-century house [with] fifteen rooms or more and a cellar and sundry other good things.” “Watch the Birdie” was published as a 100-copy signed and numbered chapbook by Rosemary Pardoe last Christmas. Campbell's own foreword and afterword (yes, they are true) more than double the story's disquieting impact.*

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*This piece was written over the last two days of April 1983, at the request of John Meakin, then the landlord of the Baltic Fleet, a pub on the dock road in Liverpool. He published an intermittent newspaper called The Daily Meak and was known to his friends as the Admiral. The account that follows was to be published in his newspaper.*

—Ramsey Campbell

## WATCH THE BIRDIE

I HOPE I SHALL not be blamed if a true story has no proper ending.

Let me start by explaining that I'm in the business of making Merseyside disappear. No, I'm not a town planner: I create horrors as a writer instead. Many of my tales have been set in Merseyside, and a disconcerting number of the settings no longer exist, rather as the model in the Poe story died as soon as the painter had achieved her likeness on canvas. For example, "The Companion" takes place in the old Tower fairground at New Brighton; "The Show Goes On" is set in the Hippodrome cinema, last seen in a series of skips; my novel *The Face That Must Die* shows Cantril Farm through the eyes of a paranoid schizophrenic, though it looks pretty much as it does to the rest of us, and now they've changed the name of Cantril Farm. And my first novel was set in Toxteth. You will appreciate that I have yet to write about the present government.

My novel *To Wake The Dead* (known in America as *The Parasite*, though I haven't room to explain why) contains a chapter set in the Grapes in Egerton Street, during the reign of the Meakins. That's how I came to be in the Baltic Fleet recently, to present a copy to the Admiral. The place was packed with office celebrations and planners discussing how many trees they could plant in the car parks next year, and so it wasn't until closing time that I had a chance to make the presentation. The Admiral locked the doors and offered me a coffee, and we settled down by the parrot for a chat.

The parrot had been dozing so soundly that nothing had roused it, not even the cries of anguish from the dock road as someone else discovered there was no way into the Baltic Fleet car park. Now it blinked at us with the balefulness of a Member of Parliament woken by question time, and croaked something that sounded vaguely Russian to me. "I don't now where he got that from," the Admiral said.

I had a momentary impression that I should know, but couldn't think why: something I'd seen in the pub? I glanced round at the deserted tables, smudgy now that clouds like sludge were flooding the sky outside, and wondered aloud if the pub had a resident ghost. "Could be," the Admiral said.

My interest quickened and so, I imagined, did the parrot's—listening for something worth repeating, I supposed. "You've seen it?"

"Heard it. That was enough."

He didn't seem to be joking. "Good places to hear ghosts, pubs," I suggested.

"That's all I'd been drinking," he assured me, tapping the coffee mug and earning himself a slow reproving psittacine blink. The pub was growing dimmer. "Tell me about it," I said, "and maybe I can write about it for your newspaper."

"I was sitting here one afternoon drinking coffee." The pub had been locked and deserted, the sun had dazzled the windows so that he couldn't see the deserted interior without moving from where he was sitting, and quite without warning he'd heard someone coming upstairs from below.

You must have seen the steps that lead down to the toilets and their famed graffiti, or if you haven't yet you're bound to: stone steps that look as if they might lead to a vault or a catacomb. He'd heard footsteps where he knew nobody could be, and so he didn't call out, just reached for a weapon. He was still hoping that he wouldn't have to find out if it would work under the circumstances, when the footsteps faltered and went back downstairs. When he made himself go down, of course there was nobody to be seen.

Again I felt there was something in the pub I should have noticed, again I couldn't think where. "What did the footsteps sound like?"

He pondered. "Not as heavy as they ought to have sounded," he said finally, frowning.

"Incomplete?" I suggested, trying to bring my description to life.

At last he said, "Big and slow, but as if they weren't quite there."

He didn't seem happy with that either. "And how was the parrot behaving while all this was going on?" I said.

"Nervous." Then he grinned. "Talking to himself, God knows what about."

Suddenly I thought I knew. "That Slavonic stuff he was repeating before?"

"Could well have been. How did you know?"

I wasn't sure yet, nor sure that I wanted to be. "Hang on while I have a wee," I said, as I've found one tends to say when one is the father of toddlers.

The steps to the basement were even dimmer than the pub. Somehow the dimness made my footsteps sound muffled, timid. I wished the Admiral would switch on the lights; I wished I hadn't found an excuse to go and look at what I thought I'd seen, instead of inviting him to look for himself. I couldn't help remembering that whatever he'd heard on the steps had come back down here, couldn't help remembering what I was almost sure I'd seen.



It had only been graffiti in the Gents: a few scrawled words among the collectible wit. I'd hardly noticed them except to wonder in passing what they said, for I'd been distracted by the creaking of one of the cubicle doors: I'd thought for a moment that someone had peered out at me, a large pale face which had made me think of a pig leaning out of a stall, in the moment before I'd seen there was nobody. I remembered that now, and suddenly the basement seemed colder. That must have been why I shivered as I went quickly into the Gents.

You've seen the graffiti for yourself, or you've been told about them. No wonder customers come upstairs with a smile on their faces and their heads full of quotes. But all I could see just then were the words in a language I recognized now, scrawled in the midst of the jokes. I'd heard those words more than once, I realized, and I had a good idea of what they meant and what they could do. I started forward to the nearest cubicle, for a handful of paper to wipe them out. I was nearly at the cubicle door when it creaked open and something squeezed out to take hold of me.

If I'm ever tempted not to trust my instincts I shall remember that moment. Instinct made me close my eyes tight while I lurched out of reach, toward the scrawled words. I kept my eyes on the words as I rubbed at them frantically, with my hands, since that was the quickest way. At the edge of my vision I had the impression of a figure so swollen it filled the doorway through which it was trying to struggle, arms that seemed to be lengthening as they groped toward me, groped then rose toward the large flat face that appeared to have no features. They poked at it, and then it had eyes—holes, at any rate. Then I'd rubbed out the last traces of the words, and I was alone but for the creaking of the door of the empty cubicle.

I admit it didn't take me long to climb the steps, yet by the time I reached the top I'd managed to persuade myself that I couldn't have seen all that, couldn't have seen anything like it. The pub looked as dim as the steps now. I might have asked the Admiral to put on the lights, but just then I wanted to ask my questions and get out of there. "Have you been crossing any Russians lately?" I said, as lightly as I could.

"Not unless you count selling Vladivar, no."

He thought I wasn't serious. "Just think about it. You haven't had trouble with anyone Slavonic?"

"Not in the pub, no."

I could tell he was remembering. "Outside?"

"Might have been. They could have been Slavs. A couple of sailors

pulled knives on each other in the car park one night, and we had to sort them out, that's all."

"They couldn't have sneaked in here afterward, could they?"

"Not a chance."

"That makes sense."

He stood up to switch on the lights. "Going to tell me about it?" he said.

"When I've told you how I know." Both his gaze and the parrot's were making me uncomfortable. "You see," I said, "I once did some research for a novel about the basis of all the vampire legends, until I found someone else had already written it. One thing I did was talk to a specialist in Slavonic languages who told me some of the old Slavonic incantations. There were a couple I wouldn't have used even if I'd written the book; not once he told me what they were supposed to call up. Well," I said, glad to get it over with, "one of them was written on the wall in your Gents."

He jumped up. "It's there now?"

"It was until I rubbed it out."

He sat down again and gave me a doubtful look. I could see he thought I was making up the story for his newspaper. "How come you can read Slavonic writing?" he said suspiciously.

"I can't. I copied the stuff I researched down phonetically, and that's what whoever wrote it in the Gents did. Don't you see, whichever sailor wanted to get his own back on you sent someone in to write it for him, told him what to write. And that's not all they did—"

But there was no need for me to go on, for the parrot had started croaking—croaking the words it had already tried to pronounce. I pointed nervously at it while the Admiral frowned at me, then I punched the cage to interrupt the bird before it could finish.

The Admiral's frown was no longer puzzled but dangerous. "What did you want to do that for?" he demanded.

"Didn't you hear what it was saying? Whoever was sent in here didn't just write the words on the wall, they must have spoken them as well when there was nobody to hear—nobody but *him*," I said, nodding at the parrot, which glared at me. "Couldn't you tell it was Slavonic?"

The Admiral wasn't convinced. "You haven't told me yet," he growled, "what it was supposed to do."

I couldn't go into that, not then, not there. "Let's just say that if you used the invocation in a graveyard, what it called up would be dreadful enough, but if you weren't in a graveyard it would be something even less human," I said, but my last few words might well have been

inaudible, for he was turning his head toward the steps. I saw his face change, and knew what he was hearing before I heard it myself.

I should have known that the footsteps would be terribly slow. "They're bigger," the Admiral whispered, and I could hear what he meant, though I was hearing them for the first time: they sounded as if they were growing as they lumbered up the stairs—as if they were putting on more substance. I had disliked the dimness, but now I wished desperately that he hadn't turned on the lights: at least then we would have been spared seeing. The footsteps came up halfway, unsteadily but purposefully, and I saw what might have been the top of a head, something white and rounded that seemed to be having trouble in keeping its shape. I was praying to be able to look away, to be able not to see any more, when the white dome jerked downward, the footsteps plodded back to the basement. Interrupting had achieved something after all.

Well, I told you at the outset that I couldn't promise you a proper ending. I still visit the Baltic Fleet, for the food as much as anything, but not after dark. I admit I keep a sharp eye on the parrot and the graffiti, and sometimes I need to be spoken to twice. I know the Admiral doesn't take kindly to people hitting the parrot's cage, and so I can only suggest that if you hear the bird speaking what sounds like Slavonic you do your best to interest it in something else. Quickly.

*I delivered the story to John Meakin at the beginning of May 1983. I visited the pub several times during that year, but the newspaper hadn't yet been published. Close to Christmas 1983 I arrived at the pub to find it locked and shuttered. It reopened under the new management this year. Nobody seems to know where John Meakin is.*

## Coming Soon to a Theatre Near You

by David J. Schow

*David J. Schow was born on July 13, 1955, in Marburg, West Germany—a German orphan adopted by American parents. He left Europe while a child and traveled all across the United States, before settling down in Los Angeles. As his fiction indicates, Schow is an avid film buff, and he claims to know more spatter films trivia than anyone on Earth. Most of his writing has been on films, either as a columnist for various publications or as a contributing editor to film books. He has recently completed an eight-part series on the television show *The Outer Limits* for *Twilight Zone Magazine*. (He had to use a pseudonym, Oliver Lowenbruck, when the following story appeared in the same issue of that magazine as did one of the series.) An outgrowth of those articles was *The Outer Limits Companion*, out this fall from Berkley. Schow has written eleven novelizations and series novels under at least four separate pseudonyms for Warner and Universal. His short fiction has appeared in *Whispers*, *Weird Tales*, *Fantasy Tales*, *Night Cry*, *Galileo*, and *Ares*.*

*Schow also appeared in *The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series XII*—also with a story set in a movie theatre, "One for the Horrors." Despite its title, this last was a piece of whimsical fantasy; despite its title, the following story is out-and-out horror. Schow seems to be a connoisseur of rundown movie houses. He writes: "Like J.A. Bijou's in 'One for the Horrors,' the Omicron was based on a real theatre (one in L.A.) that was massively refurbished as soon as I wrote about it."*

JONATHAN DANIEL STONER recognized the dude inside the Hollywood Magic Shoppe, the fellow poring over the display plaque of artificial eyeballs. He was from the Omicron Cinema; one of the employees. Always having five minutes to squander, Jack (as Jonathan had been dubbed in Nam by the few comrades with enough intellectual candlepower to add his first and middle names up to the sum of a tepid joke: hey there's another guy here named Richard Whiskey but we call him Dick Liquor yock yock yock) pulled himself in. He saw that the fake eyeballs were pretty

damned authentic. Nested in felt, they were glossed with some special shellac that made them gleam like real, living, wet eyes. Artificial substitutes, he thought, and his missing right leg sent a wholly imaginary local wince up to his brain.

“Say hey,” he said.

The dude from the Omicron looked up. As his face was hit by the combination of the sputtering fluorescents above and the dirty gray daylight sneaking in off Hollywood Boulevard, Jack thought maybe the guy had mononucleosis or something; superficially he looked like mere hippie fallout a decade and a half out of step with the real world, but close up Jack saw that his face was the color of a kitchen sink stained by coffee grounds. Above the face was hair skewed in a dozen directions, matted, unwashed; below, a physique withered by hard weather or drugs or both. His eyes were sunken and glazed with the slightly stoned expression Jack had learned from the perimeter snipers at Nest Kilo—burned-out Qui Nohn alumni who just didn’t give a shit anymore. And the hippie image was jelled by the overpowering miasma (no, *stink*) of patchouli oil wafting from every pore toward Jack like mustard gas. God, he hated the stuff.

The dude had not quite connected yet, and appeared to be waiting for more input.

“I come into the Omicron all the time,” Jack prompted. “Last week I caught *Dial M for Murder* and *House of Wax*. The two-way 3-D glasses were a neat idea.” Some management genius had stamped out dual lenses that were red-green for the black-and-white feature, and flipped to polarized lenses for color. The two-dollar show had been packed.

It seemed to take entire geologic ages for the dude to react. “Oh yeah,” he said in an arid, rasping voice. “I seen you lotsa times. I remember your walking stick. Yeah.” He turned back to his tray of eyeballs.

Jack shifted his weight from his government-issue cane, leaning closer to regain the dude’s attention despite the eye-watering, minty stench. “What’s next?”

Again the slow shift, as though the dude were crippled in a way Jack could not see. *Always say handicapped, not crippled*, Compton, the CO, had advised with shit-eating sincerity before his discharge. *At least you’ve fought your last battle, soldier*. Compton had always had a supreme rectal-cranial inversion.

*Crippled*. The dude arm-wrestled his own memory and won. “Uhh—*Bloody Mama* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. That’s it for Crime Week. For the weekend we got *Black Moon*. And . . . uh . . .” He plucked a wine-bottle-green eyeball from the tray and inspected it through a nonexistent loupe,

turning it like a jewel. "Some other Louis Malle film. *My Dinner with Andre*, maybe." His voice was strep-throat dry, and sounded like a bad parody of the Man with No Name.

"Or *Atlantic City*?"

"One or the other. See ya there, my man." He extended his free hand and Jack found himself receiving his first power-to-the-people handshake in ten years. The dude's yogurt pallor was easy to dismiss as the cost of toiling in the eternal darkness of a theatre, but the papery texture of his flesh made Jack think of shaking hands with a mummy. The brittle skin seemed to crackle in his grasp, the bones beneath rearranging themselves arthritically like dried voodoo talismans. Up, down, once, twice, zomboid and mechanical. Jack remembered the rack of artificial steel and vinyl arms stored near the shelves from which the medics picked a leg to replace the one he'd lost. It had been like a tombful of dismembered mannikins, the limbs and parts devoid of viscera; hollow, lifeless surrogates. The Omicron dude's dead grasp was what Jack thought shaking with one of those plastic-coated hooks would feel like.

The dude unclasped, then produced from his pocket a slim card in a cashier's-check pattern of waffled green lines, with GOOD FOR ONE FREE ADMISSION stamped on front. "Yours," he said. "Got to keep our regulars satisfied."

"Hey, thanks." Abruptly Jack felt like a heel for mentally bumming the dude.

"See you there." He sought the mate for the single glass eye he balanced in his palm, like pairing clearies for luck in marbles.

Jack executed his stiff, clockwork 180-degree turn and left the store, the thump-click of his workboot and cane in concert barely audible. He practiced to make it unobtrusive; he hated it when newly introduced people gawked at his right leg before looking at his face. He thought he could empathize with the way women felt about their breasts.

On the Boulevard, somebody had pried out the bronze disc of Rhonda Fleming's sidewalk star, stolen it, leaving a crater. A musclebound black superstar, towering above the pedestrians on a hyperthyroidal pair of roller skates with Day-Glo orange wheels, swerved to miss the crater and nearly center-punched Jack. He and the cacophony of his gigantic ghetto-blaster blended into the Friday swarm of walkers before anyone could swear. He'd been wearing an Army fatigue shirt with the sleeves ripped off.

Jack steadied himself against the display window of the Hollywood Magic Shoppe and allowed himself ten seconds of hemlock-pure racism. It primed him, erasing the good feeling of copping a free pass to the

Omicron, and as he walked through the grimy, humid smog and the abrasive tide of Boulevard flotsam, he escalated his irritation into unfocused, hair-trigger anger. Everyone around him on the street was loping along, trying to look badder than everyone else.

Jack's cane attracted no notice on the Boulevard. He was a mundane diversion in the midst of the jarhead Marines on leave, the slutty preteen heartbreakers leaning on the bus stop posts, the meandering gaggles of Japanese tourists, the smug pairings of smartly leathered punks and overconfident faggots, the Hollywood vets with their straight-ahead stares (the better to avoid the pushy Scientologists just this side of Las Palmas), the garbage-pickers and shopping-bag loonies. The Walk of the Stars seemed perpetually encrusted with a gummy vomit of spilled drinks and litter, like the sticky floor of a porno theatre. Along the maze of blaring rock noise and Iranian jewelry shops, step-in eateries displayed steaming, greasy triangles of pizza, or the oily components of colorless hero sandwiches, or peculiar platefuls of what looked like Korean food, varnished for presentation, reminding him of those eyes—preserved, fakely realistic surrogates. The lavender spire of Frederick's pierced the waistline of the Boulevard somewhere behind him, a centerpiece to the whole tacky, vulgar carnival.

*You've fought your last battle, crip.*

The words fried into Jack's brain, spoken too many times in too many subtle ways. The sentiment ate into his calm like fluorine acid into the fuse of a beer-bottle bomb. This place could really drag you down.

He decided the Omicron pass was not snotty charity, and then forgot about it, feeling a little better.

His grimace into the mirror told him he should shave more often, pay more attention to his hair. But what the hell—he wouldn't care so much half an hour from now.

The prostitute pulled her sweater over her head. Her corner was by the House of Pancakes on Sunset Boulevard, and Jack always thought there was a terrific joke in that somewhere. The first thing she looked at while she stripped was the fleshtone plastic and metal ornamentation of his right leg.

*Traveling light. M-16 on rapid-fire, clips in his shirt, rifle grenades taped across his thighs. Bravo Patrol's point man was fifty yards back, sauntering down the dead center of the jungle trail because he knew the anti-personnel mines were salted slyly into the border of the path where careful soldiers might tread. They all knew. Across from him, his counterpart, Teller, eased ahead to help flush out snipers on the opposite side of the path. He and Teller were Bravo Patrol's big mavericks. Teller collected VC ears and*

*sometimes their balls. The crumping sound of 60-millimeter mortar fire was starting to deafen them. Time to be careful.*

She crushed out an unfiltered Lucky Strike and said, "They almost took a packet of your shot, lover." He saw the wings of flab curving over her kidneys. Her ass seemed a yard wide.

"No, they didn't," he said, rehearsed. "And yes, it all still works." He waited naked on the bed. Exposed.

"Talkers are always comedians," she said as she descended on him. The roots of her hennaed blonde hair were brown.

*Ears pricking. Seeing that stupid bastard Teller and realizing and forgetting his craving for a smoke and using up three more seconds ripping a grenade loose and locking it into the muzzle of M-16. No time. Wanting to scream they're right above you stupid asshole! No time—stock to shoulder, finger to trigger. The weapon kicks and the tree thirty yards over mushrooms into an orange blossom of fire and screaming Cong. Teller's mouth drops like a stag party patsy's in surprise and he sprays the tree above uselessly with slugs. The whole goddamn jungle comes alive with the nasty, spattering racket of weapons fire like a crazy typewriter noise or water dripped into a pan of hot bacon grease. Not like movie gunfire. The flaming tree lights up the entire perimeter and he is exposed. Has to buy five seconds, has to retreat to cover while Bravo charges to catch up. Backing gingerly through fronds onto the trail. Feeling his foot fall short. He makes one step blind because he's watching Teller's head leave his body. It spins.*

There was flat, sour bile in his throat. The whore had too much mileage on her and was unappetizing with her duds off. He felt unaroused and ill. With a fatalistic devotion to duty she worked to excite him reflexively, to make his own body betray him. It became boring, repetitious, like a grindhouse stroke flick. He felt cold lying there, watching thin smoke from the ashtray unreel toward the ceiling.

*Nothing happens until he lifts his foot, then the mine POPS beneath him, smacking air concussively through his head. He doesn't feel the rifle grenade taped to his thigh explode. No details; just a stab of heat and bright light. The dispensary lights hurt his eyes more when he awakes, four days later, thinking Bravo Patrol did his job for him.*

She pushed off him immediately, and left her sweat on one of his bathroom towels.

"Have a nice day," he said to the empty room, watching daylight fade across his barrack-neat arrangement of serviceable furniture, of home-made bookshelves and desk. He clicked on his TV remote, a do-it-yourself project he'd tinkered together two months ago, and browsed the free program guide he habitually picked up every Wednesday at the Mayfair



Market. Automatically, for a giggle, he thumbed back to the Community Classifieds.

*Beached Manatee Shelley Winters uses the Grand Canyon for a toilet! Signed, The Scumbag.*

If you wanted a good barometer of Hollywood's blue-collar weirdness, you turned to the Community Classifieds, suitably on the inside back page of the TV schedule and printed on pulp stock so cheap that your reading fingers were black by the time you got to the good stuff. For those too illiterate to make the letter column of the *L.A. Times*, too straight to ever consider undergrounds (now facetiously termed the "alternative press," Jack thought with contempt—another sellout), too normal and mundane to ever air their petty beefs anywhere but in a playroom or a bar with a constantly burbling television set, the Community Classifieds were a steam valve and a cheap thrill all rolled into a single weekly page of lunacy. Any local nonentity could phone in a two-line "ad" or editorial comment for free; the paper always had too many to run, and the week-to-week progressions offered by the column's stalwarts—people who by journalistic squatter's rights appeared regularly, trading barbs under obnoxious pseudonyms—were more entertaining than any diversions offered by the cursed tube.

*COME BACK TO THE FIVE & DIME . . . ZARATHUSTRA: Nonwhite athletically inclined punk-oriented animal lovers (handicapped okay) desired for (proto) fringe videos. Selected foreign audience. Flat fee. Working name director. No amateurs or freaks who answer ads like this—685-8299.*

Does anybody out there have one of those rubber-chicken enema bags so popular in the 1950s? Hah, thought so. Dr. Sleaze.

House noise cassettes. Keep your canaries company while you're not at home. \$7.95 ea. 757-4414 Eves.

Frustrated military, used athletes and adventurous college boys call Sid. 556-4348.

Jack's eyes skimmed past two familiar words, then backtracked to get the whole message:

*The Omicron Theatre should pay us money to attend such a moth-eaten, seat-sprung, paint-peeling, roach-infested garbage dump! Flake away, hippie scum! D.W.E., South La Brea.*

When he rose to pull a beer from his tiny refrigerator, he rechecked his shirt pocket, forgetting his temporarily unlovely aroma. The free pass was still there, and that decided him for the evening. His car, a 1972 Comet with the pedals displaced to the left, was still undergoing a mileage checkup in the shop, but that did not put the Omicron out of his range. He could still walk, by God.

The Omicron reminded Jack of a kid's bedroom. To an adult, a noninitiate, it looked like a trash heap—but there was a comforting order inside for those who cared to delve past the superficial. It would never appeal to the Rolls Royce trade, yet was not quite as bad as the kung-fu sleaze pits of downtown L.A. which looked as though they had been razed by Mongols. The Omicron was, in essence, a “normal” theatre stripped down for combat, its patrons exemplars of the no frills class.

Jack assumed the seats were veterans of less fortunate film emporiums long since demolished. The heavy draperies, colorless with dust and age, had been hanging around since 1930. The concrete floor had been scoured clean of carpeting ages ago and remained unpainted; two-dollar customers spilled an awful lot of crap. During intermissions the auditorium lit up from behind; two emergency floods on battery banks comprised the sole interior illumination. They were mounted high on the corners of the projection booth like devil horns, and when they clicked on they threw long shadows from the heads of the audience all the way to the foot of the disused state in a silhouette mimic of a churchyard's listing headstones: When those lights clicked off, you'd better be sitting. Jack knew, because here there no niceties like usher bulbs on every other row, or twinkling blue “landing lights” on the aisle like he'd seen at the Vogue Theatre. Even the EXIT signs on each side of the screen were long dysfunctional.

And if the snack bar had been a restaurant, Jack would have found a Grade-C certification ditched behind the clotted Coke machine. He suspected that the roaches flatbacking it, feet-up in the yellow light of the candy counter's display pane, were victims of the popcorn.

The Omicron was practically Jack's only acknowledged watering hole. Like him, it was tatty in patches and looked broken down, but he could pass its portals and trade nods of recognition with the dude he had met at the magic shop, and that was important. He was a regular here, an initiate, and he appreciated that the caretakers of this dump, unquote, took pains where they counted—with the programming, and the quality of the projection.

Oh, yeah—and admission was still two American bucks.

Jack's terrific feeling of renewed well-being evacuated through his bowels and good knee when he plunked down his free pass at the booth and looked directly up into the varnished, wine-bottle-green eyes of the new Omicron employee.

From the third row he could barely see the screen. The crash-and-bash din of the gangster movies could not etch his concentration even in the

darkness of the theatre. The tarpaulined shapes in the orchestra pit became ominous; the auditorium, an ambush waiting to happen. He slouched in his seat. His mind chased logic chains like a lab rat on the scent of good, putrid Limburger cheese. None of the available conclusions eased his shock by a mote.

He had shuffled dumbly through the lobby, knowing that to meet the gaze of the candy-counter employee, the dude, would now be to let the fear engulf him to the upper lip. Those flat, glassy stares, unwavering, unblinking, like the appraisal of a puff adder, came out of a tray in the Hollywood Magic Shoppe.

*The Cong—a supernatural hive intelligence, they could blank a grunt's brain, make themselves invisible. Twelve-year-old commandos were kicking President Johnson's butt by proxy. The fear. It could ambush you in the dark.*

(On the screen, Bruce Dern, twelve years younger, indulges a sadistic little flash of ultraviolence. Homosexual rape.)

The Omicron staff. Not shellshocked orts from the dead age of the flower child. Just . . . dead, perhaps? Certainly they seemed to feel of death, and smell of it. Fragile, with their mushroom-pale, coolly bleached skin and their fixed, shellacked eyes. Stinking of aftershaves, colognes, patchouli, any heavy oil or preservative base of alcohol. Moving, like—

*The baby palm lizard he found at the base of a tree. The roiling chaos of maggots revealed when he flipped it over. The legless grubs filling the stomach cavity; their mad dining was what made the lizard appear to be moving. Its flesh remained as an envelope, papery and stiff, a lizard-shape to hide the fact of entrails long consumed. Its eyes were gone.*

Crazy.

Motive, you dumb gimp! yelled his mind. Motive! The *why* of a fleatrap cinema overseen by ambulatory dead people, or whatever the hell they were. Certainly not to derail the world and the American Way.

(Robert De Niro, having spent an hour of screen time evacuating his skull with airplane glue, is discovered amid the marsh reeds, his spike in the dirt, a rubber lanyard still making the dead bicep bulge.)

A snap decision in the dark. Jack knew he had to investigate, to resolve. It was what he had always done.

He found temporary satisfaction in the glow bouncing back from the movie screen. One row back and five seats over, a black guy swaddled in a stinking fatigue jacket snored gutturally and no one told him to shut up or get out. In some of the wing chairs, the ones affording an uncomfortably slanted view of the screen, more wineheads dozed unchallenged, their feet on the chairbacks. The others this far forward (guys

with dates generally holed up farther back in the auditorium) seemed totally narcotized by the film. The date duos, the monster-movie prep-pies, and the good citizens would scurry out during the end credits, while the snoozing derelicts and street dregs of Tinseltown waited to be ushered out under duress. For a couple of bucks over the flat rate for Ripple, a spongehead could blow an entire day sleeping out of the weather and sucking up racy moving pictures. Where did one find zombie fodder? Just haunting the Hollywood streets like gray wraiths, filthy blankets rolled under one arm, with hollow eyes and vacant stares, hanging out long after the sideshow freaks and hookers and male hustlers vacated Hollywood and Sunset and Santa Monica in the predawn. One more bag lady, one more shopping-cart loon or religious burnout or sooty panhandler would never be missed.

Intermission came, and with it a few more truths. He slouched down when the auditorium floods blinked on, actually recoiling from the light because he did not wish to be singled out. The decision to stay after closing had already been made. During the second feature he must have touched the pistol in the pocket of his pea coat a hundred times, to ensure it still existed. He packed it around with him almost all the time now.

If trouble leapt out of the trees tonight, it was reasonable to allow that he could win a physical contest against the Omicron's scraggly human cinders, even with a missing leg. *Their* bones must be like communion wafers now, he thought, his hand seeking the gun unconsciously again.

It was a luxuriously heavy .45 automatic, Marine field-issue, and his practice had been to pocket it whenever he traveled on foot. Lately it lived in the pocket of the pea coat all the time. The sucker ate an eight-round clip and an extra slug was already in the chamber. It had frequently proven a ready deterrent to muggers, at least those marginally human. Provided his thesis was true, even artillery like the monster .45 could not kill someone already dead . . . . But it sure as hell was capable of blowing off arms and legs and heads at medium range, and they couldn't chase you if they didn't have legs.

Provided he could retreat efficiently without one, too.

He considered his chances as the second film, *Bonnie and Clyde*, began to unreel.

During one of its chaotic shootouts (Gene Hackman was about to get iced by the Feds), Jack changed seats, edging closer to the wall of curtain on the left side of the auditorium. As long as he was not in the firing line between a viewer and the luminous rectangle of the screen, he would never be noticed. He knew how to walk in the dark, even theatre-dark, even leaning on the damned cane and humping his surrogate leg along.

Once on the fringe of the farthest row of seats, he edged toward the nearest dead EXIT light. The suffocatingly musty curtains smelled like some abandoned library, and his nose tried to sneeze. He held.

In another minute the early leavers would be hurrying out. He avoided the stair railing leading to the push-bar exit, and angled behind the screen, and looked up to be confronted by a reversed tight close-up of a face thirty feet high. The boxy, flat-black speaker apparatus, its horizontal planes steeped in brown dust, directed its salvo away from him and out through the million tiny perforations in the screen. Out toward—

He felt a mad, directional itch skittering from his hairline, around one eye, over his nose. Stifling his cry of reaction, he slapped away the cockroach before it could hide in his mouth. Yeah, the curtains were probably alive with the goddamn things. He thought of them congregating in the trough of the filthy Coke machine after closing, leaving their egg cases in the drains, or mating in the cigarette butts and piss filling the john's two urinals. Did roaches mate or were they, what did you call it, parthenogenic? Hermaphroditic? He hated the damn things the way he hated breaking spiderwebs with his face, the way he hated the monster leeches and vampire mosquitoes he'd met across the ocean. Or rats.

Above him, the screen lit up with an end-credit roll. Backwards. He hunkered down and thought about rats for a minute.

*The grunge theatre in Chicago is a sleaze-pit, cold as a corpse locker, in the bosom of the annual blizzards. Jack and two fellow renegades from Basic are celebrating their first-ever weekend passes by touring the Windy City. Their passes are thirty-five hours old; now they are in attendance at a triple-bill of skin-flicks aimed at the midnight-to-dawn beat-off crowd. The theatre is in the middle of a burned-out DMZ called Division Street. Swindler, grandly polluted on a fifth of George Dickel's finest 80-proof paint remover, re-dubs Chicago the Shitty City, tittering at the rhyme. Ford, equally blitzed, elaborates by making Chicago the Puckered Red Asshole of the Universe. Jack's laugh goes cheesy and sour; he pulls his boots up off the floor because he has spotted the rats quietly on the discarded candy boxes and popcorn tubs. In the middle film, a cowlike naked blonde accidentally sets fire to her bed with a smoldering reefer (the fire is a special effect that must have planed away half the film's \$1.98 budget), and she and her musclebound Latino buggerers flee the frame as a line of jet-gas fire sweeps along the bottom of the picture. Jack hears the squeals from the screen and realizes they are not part of the soundtrack. What must be dozens of rats have been surprised by the sudden flood of light back there, behind the screen. Unpleasant. The rodent army retreats into the dark, to mingle*

*with the audience. He watches a crushed soft-drink cup manipulate itself patiently across the cold stone floor. He gets up to leave.*

Could there be rats in the Omicron? In California, maybe mice. A voice in Jack's head told him he was obfuscating. Rats did not worry him.

The house floods snapped on and the rest of the patrons herded noisily out. Jack waited, secreted behind the hanging curtains, weight at ease on his fake leg.

The EXIT door crashed shut—sheet metal hitting a wood jamb and rattling a loose push-bar—and did not open again. For sixty seconds he breathed shallowly, listening. Then he inched forward until he could see the auditorium under the glare of the floods.

There were perhaps ten derelicts out there, still snoring. Maintenance movements and sounds echoed toward Jack from the lobby area; then somebody—the new guy, the one with the bottle-green eyes—moved down the aisles, waking the bums up. *Excuse me excuse me you have to leave now.* Jack watched his progress; the same speech for each sleeper. They grunted. Some got the speech twice before reluctantly shuffling out. One nodded and resumed sleeping—the black guy in the fatigue coat. The Omicron employee moved to the next customer. Like shabby, ragtag Conestogas lurching west, they dragged themselves out, all except Fatigue Coat, who had been sitting behind Jack, and to whom the new employee gradually circled back.

Behind Jack, the curtains rustled, moving themselves. Drifts of thin dust sifted down. It might have been the vacuum effect of the front doors closing.

He looked, and saw the Omicron guy standing mutely over Fatigue Coat, watching him sleep, watching with those fixed eyes whose pupils never expanded or contracted. Watching with the head-cocked attitude and characterless gaze of a praying mantis surveying the struggle of a future meal.

The other made his way toward the pair, dressed exactly as Jack had seen him in the Hollywood Magic Shoppe. He had a baseball bat.

Budget security as well, Jack thought.

The curtains were still moving, wafting as if in an unfelt, warm breeze. There was a faraway, crackling-paper noise.

When the dude swung the bat against the back of Fatigue Coat's neck, it made a sound like five pounds of raw steak smacking a linoleum floor. Jack felt a sympathetic local jab in the area where his backbone met his skull, and the black guy did a forward roll to slump out of sight between the seats. They bent to lift him, and he came up as slack and limp as an abused mattress.

Another roach dashed in a zigzag across the back of Jack's hand. His reaction came an instant too late, and when he tried to brush it away he hit the curtain, and three of its buddies fell from the folds of cloth to the floor and scurried away. The crackling-paper sound, like hundreds of tiny, drumming fingers, was noticeably louder.

When he looked back, Fatigue Coat was being laboriously dragged toward the orchestra pit. Each Omicron dude had a leg. And a dark, wet, erratic smear was left in their wake, shining up from the concrete slope of the aisle. It was something the regular patrons would never notice anyway.

It sounded like rain, and Jack thought of the flea-pit movie house in Chicago. His vision of the movement in the orchestra pit resolved into a roiling whirlpool of scuttling brown bodies. Not rats. Roaches. Millions of roaches, swarming over each other in the dark maw of the pit. Not the killer cockroaches, the three-inch long monsters that could fly—merely the tiniest household vermin, multiplied a billionfold before his awed eyes. And around his feet. He saw them move in quietly scratching, brittle brown masses across the floor like a shoe-sole-deep tide of sentient mud. He thought of them detouring up his plastic leg, antennae probing. The hairs on his good leg prickled. He held. The leeches, the Stuka mosquitos, the goddamn kraits had been far worse, he told himself. The .45 automatic, polished to a dull sheen by the pea coat pocket, came out now, shaking in his hand. The shaking pissed him off.

He thought of them living in the seat cushions, the curtains, the cracks in the floor, the moldy planking and rafters, the termite-hollowed superstructure. More than enough breeding room, even if one did not count the snack bar . . .

The dude and the new employee heaved Fatigue Coat over the lip of the orchestra pit into the riotous, churning sea of chitinous bugs. He seemed to hinge at the waist, like one of those backward-jointed dummies used for the big jump in the cheapest films. He did not look real. Neither did the sheer mass of waiting roaches—at least three vertical feet of them, he saw now, swarming nearly to the rusted brass rail of the pit. They embraced the body hungrily. The last part of him to submerge into the attack of brown, bulletlike forms was his foot, toes protruding from a demolished sneaker wound with dirty friction tape. Then he was gone, gobbled up, and quickly.

The hammer of the quivering .45 was cocked now. The display below forced Jack to grip the gun tightly in his fist and cock it with his free hand. That was when he fumbled the cane. It dropped away, missing his grasp, and hit the edge of the stage, somersaulting into the open, its

rubber street tip bouncing it off the orchestra pit rail. It clattered to the bare concrete floor. Loudly.

The EXIT door was still at hand, but Jack did not try to stomp toward it. He had heard it being chained shut from his hiding place.

They came for him behind the Omicron screen, clumping in cadence up the exit steps like a two-man funeral procession, and found him backed against the wall, pistol rigidly thrust out before him, a scepter of power, a talisman against evil.

"No closer." His voice did not quaver. The gun was now steady; the threat was defined. His good leg held him locked to the stone wall.

The new employee's voice croaked in monotone: "Excuse me, but you have to leave now . . ." The bottle-green, glassy eyes stared at the dead space between Jack's head and shoulder.

Jack could not trust the light, but he was certain that the dude, the elder employee, smiled at him when Jack uttered the single syllable: "No." The grin was dry and lifeless, a manipulated, puppeteered thing, matching horribly with the fixed phoniness of the eyes and the memory of fragile, cured, dead flesh. He moved toward Jack purposefully, grin fixed, eyes fixed.

Second warnings were for bad movies, too. Jack cut loose his bonus cartridge.

The boom of the shot knocked more dust out of the curtains. It resonated inside the girderwork and made the steel cables securing the screen vibrate. Jack flinched. What even an unmodified .45 bullet could do to a human skull at medium close range was something seldom depicted in those movies, either. Basically, it made a little hole going in and a huge hole coming out. Frequently it could decapitate the aggressor. That was how Teller had bought it.

A perfect black dot appeared on the dude's forehead just over the right eye. The hair on the back of his head flew apart violently, followed by a cloud of brown, metallic chaff, like pulverized cardboard. It glittered in the air and settled. Then roaches began to boil out of the forehead hole. The grin stayed. The dude took another step forward.

Jack fired convulsively after that.

The eye exploded like zircon struck with a steel hammer. Dead teeth were blown east like stubs of shattered chalk. The head disintegrated into flaking quarters. Roaches flooded out from the neck stump.

Jack swung, dropped sights, and put a slug through the new employee's outstretched hand. No grimace of impact, but it spun him, and he lost balance and tumbled headfirst through the curtains into the orchestra pit. His buddy, sans head, was still tracking mindlessly toward



Jack. Jack squeezed off, and the point-blank blast tore away everything below the dude's left kneecap and sent it flying through the movie screen. He crumpled. Freed bus scattered for cover.

Hurdling along, pole-vaulting, actually, *click-thump*, he made it to the exit door without falling on his face. Roaches were crawling up his legs now. The case-hardened padlock hasp and tempered chain were no match for the bullet that kicked them apart, and Jack shoved the door, doubling it back against the outside wall with a crash. Outside, the paving was slick with rainwater; puddles gleamed back at him in the trapezoid of dim light surrounding his elongated shadow. Good. They hated water. He limped out into the alley.

He never saw the new employee, flailing pathetically in a waist-high quicksand of chewing insects, struggling to stand. Nor did he see the new employee's seams burst, to feed the flood tide now cascading over the fallen walking stick, testing, tasting, analyzing. Angrily.

The .45 burned in his fist. The loss of the cane pushed him into overexertion. *At least you've fought your last battle, soldier . . .*

Some guardian angel had abandoned a split half of broomstick in a garbage dumpster, and that helped get him home. He stopped often to slap at himself, and after about ten minutes he heard sirens.

The bottle of George Dickel's finest on the countertop was thoughtfully notched so a potential drinker might view how much stock remained. Of the eight ounces inside when Jack burst into the apartment, four vanished before he even sat down.

His leg relaxed at last, and he might have screamed. His breath whooshed out and he bolted down another shot straight and neat, letting his gut warm. Sweat dumbed up his clothing with dampness. He rested the .45 on the table, next to the open bottle, and in a few silent minutes he felt better, more relaxed. The gun had cooled.

*Bam*, he thought. *Bam, bam, bam, and the dude popped open and there they were, a hive intelligence, like the Cong, thriving under our noses, living off our garbage, our human garbage, and good old Jack Daniels Stoner had found out.*

He took another pull from the bottle. A slower-killing slug, he thought, looking again at the gun.

A hair was stuck to it.

Absently he moved to pluck it from the metal. It moved.

His insides jumped. It was protruding from the barrel, brown and thin and wavering, and it was not a hair.

He thought he saw a madly scurrying roach speed out of the mouth of

the gun. Quickly, he slapped at the bare table surface and strained to check the underside. Nothing. It was his imagination dropping into overdrive, fueled by the octane of whiskey. Nothing. The gun was clean.

*But those little suckers sure run fast.*

He did last rites for the bottle and shuddered. Then, grimly, he started on the leftover beer. Soon he fell asleep on the sofa of his neat, ordered, vermin-free apartment.

And when he woke he knew they had found him. He had ferried their scouts home with him, and now they had him.

His good leg ached horribly. He remembered the aluminum crutch, ugly and unused, still in the foyer closet. Before being fitted with his plastic leg, he had learned to use the crutch as a surrogate. He tensed before jerking open the closet door, and something tiny and brown dashed out of sight behind the jamb. He was certain he had seen this one. He grabbed the crutch, and again his peripheral vision noted quick, dark movement, but in the time it took to turn his head and focus, it was gone—hidden, out of the light.

The countertop! Leaning on the crutch, he humped feverishly across the room. More nothing.

“Damn it!” Frustration and panic lay in wait.

The pistol was still on the table, but not as he thought he had left it. Now its barrel was pointed at the chair where he had sat drinking. He knew there were at least three or four slugs still in the clip, minimum, and never in his life had he gotten bombed enough to leave any weapon idly aimed at himself, loaded or no.

From the cabinets, the spaces beneath the counter tiles, the interior of the stove, they monitored him. It was a reasonable assumption. He stopped the childish bullshit of trying to catch them, and started to proceed methodically.

He smacked a spare clip into the gun and reloaded the exhausted one before sliding everything back into the pea coat. He pocketed all the change he could scrounge. To leave became imperative—not to return to the Omicron, oh no, not unless one wanted to spend a few months posthumously helming the snack bar, but to get clear of the apartment before they had an opportunity to catch him napping. The quiet walls unnerved him now, pressed against him with the weight of a million tiny, impatient bodies. Most likely they were right above his head and he could not see them, like Teller.

On his way to the door he thought he'd spotted one on the tabletop, maybe the one from the gun. He ignored it. He would never be fast

enough to get the little mothers. But he could be fast enough, sharp enough, still to get out, to survive.

The night was still black and set. Droplet patterns from the a.m. mist accreted on the metal of his crutch. He walked. He proceeded methodically, with nowhere to go but *away*.

He was in the crosswalk at La Brea and Santa Monica when the headlights nailed him. An oilslick-black Buick Regal, filled with the resplendence of a coked-out pimp pilot and a pair of chromed hookers, stopped with its front tires over the white line. Jack saw that the riders were pretty jolly for three o'clock in the morning. He stared at them through the windshield, realizing they had no idea of what was happening.

An angry black face bared teeth through the open driver's side window. "Keep yo' goddamn hands off the car, mothafuckin' bum!" He floored the pedal. Jack heard the engine roar and jumped as the Buick ran the red and swerved back into the lane, ass-skidding like a slot car. The jibes, in high, ridiculing feminine voices, echoed behind.

He stood in the crosswalk, arms open. "No!" They thought he was a derelict, more of the human garbage washed up on the streets of downtown Hollywood. Like the winos in the Omicron, like Fatigue Coat. "You're *wrong!*" he shouted, and his voice bounced off the Thrifty's and the Burger King and the car wash, and the bag lady sleeping on the bus stop bench paid no attention. They all thought he was just another loon, yelling in an intersection at three in the morning, and he felt the crushing weight of the need to tell everyone the truth.

But the light changed, and he kept on moving because that was what he was trained to do. He was still the point man, the patrol's maverick; his job was to make practical decisions fast and act on them instinctively. As soon as he made the curb he thought he spotted a stray roach struggling up his pant leg in the wet neon glow of the DON'T WALK sign, and his fist instantly responded, swooping down to smash it. His plastic leg resounded with its characteristic, drumlike *thunk* as his hand flattened the bug into nonexistence. He fancied he felt a reflex tremor from the leg nerves that no longer existed, either.

His body skipped a breath and he froze. The sound his fist had made against his plastic leg was subtly deeper than usual—the difference in pitch between an empty glass and a filled one.

Jack's mouth dried up with amazing speed. His plastic leg has hollow, like the leg of a Ken doll. Lots of empty space down there where he could not see. Or feel.

He tore open his pea coat and jerked loose the straps that held the

prosthetic limb buckled fast to his ruined flesh. From somewhere down there another roach free-fell to land on its back, legs wiggling. Jack pivoted on the crutch and stomped it into the sidewalk cracks.

Keeling madly forward, he grabbed the leg by its jointed plastic ankle and heaved it in a clumsy cartwheel toward a litter basket next to the stoplight pole. He did not see it crash-land; he was watching another roach scurry into the sewer grating, wondering if it had come from him.

He left the leg there, jutting crookedly out of the litter basket, looking like a vaudevillian joke. By dawn some bag lady would scavenge it. Under the chancy light of the mercury-vapor lamps he had no way of telling whether the bugs he now saw scuttering about on his abandoned leg were from within the leg itself, or from the garbage already stinking in the overfilled basket. They swarmed and capered as though cheated.

Using his crutch, rather proficiently he thought, he moved purposefully on into the slick, black night. His pantleg fluttered crazily because it was empty, and for that very reason he paid it no mind.



## Hands with Long Fingers

by Leslie Halliwell

*Leslie Halliwell was born in Bolton in 1929, and he grew up against an industrial background in which splendid new cinemas contrasted with the poverty, unemployment and grime of real life. Since childhood Halliwell has been a film enthusiast. He ran specialized cinemas in Cambridge, became a journalist on Picturegoer, and was a publicity executive for the Rank Organisation. In 1959 he joined Granada Television as a film researcher and later became program buyer on the long-running Cinema series. Since 1968 he has been buying most of the feature films and series screened by the ITV network, and he makes a number of buying trips to Hollywood each year in search of material.*

*Well known in England for his books on television and film—these include Halliwell's Filmgoer's Companion, Halliwell's Film Guide, Halliwell's Television Companion, Halliwell's Teleguide, Halliwell's Movie Quiz, Halliwell's Hundred, and The Filmgoer's Book of Quotes—Halliwell would seem an unlikely author for a collection of horror stories. Or maybe not. After all, most writers of horror fiction also have a keen interest in films, so why not the reciprocal? Halliwell's first collection of supernatural stories, *The Ghost of Sherlock Holmes* (fittingly, the author lives in Surrey), displays a deep affection for the traditional and inventive talent of Halliwell's own. Leslie Halliwell is currently at work on a second such collection.*

I DON'T USUALLY dream. What's more, until I met Paul Binet I had never in my life had an experience which might be considered supernatural. I took life as I found it; I enjoyed my work and my pleasure; I expected a scientific explanation for everything. Anything of value which I have accomplished has been in the way of shedding further light on obscure historical or literary events. I don't welcome mystery; I explain it away. In particular, I have exposed several frauds of a supposedly occult nature. Yet here I find myself setting down a series of events which defies rational analysis. Perhaps the very recapitulation of what happened, in chrono-

logical sequence, will help towards further clarification. But I suspect not.

When Emmanuel Hilary died in October, I was surprised to find myself invited by his son John to attend the funeral. Very surprised indeed. I knew the son only slightly. We were at Sidney Sussex together, though I think he was in fact a year my junior. At any rate we went to some of the same clubs. The father I knew not at all except from once attending his course of lectures on Italian architecture. John introduced us, and we had a drink together in the public house at the bottom of Mill Lane. In his last years old Emmanuel acquired the reputation of being a bit gaga. He squandered quite a lot of his considerable fortune on the restoration of a crumbling eighteenth-century villa near Florence. He died there. At the time I happened to be living in a rented cottage not far away, in a village on the slopes of Monte Morillo. I was researching a book on Cagliostro: not really my line, but one must find a way of paying the butcher's bills. When the invitation came, I hesitated for an hour, then sent a note of acceptance. In the circumstances, a refusal might have seemed discourteous. Besides, I felt instinctively that there was something behind the invitation. John must want to see me. Thirty years ago we had parted in Cambridge without so much as a handshake. Our only direct contact during the last decade was a club dinner after my series of radio talks on the occult; but I remembered him well as a man who did not suffer fools gladly, yet was himself more devious than intelligent. In urging me to visit his father's mansion he undoubtedly had some motive more significant than wanting me to help eat up the baked meats after sitting through a doleful church service in a faith that wasn't mine.

The Villa Fabricotti was hidden from the road. However much trouble Emmanuel had taken, its situation was such that it could never suggest anything but damp and decay unless the thick wood which surrounded it were cut down. It was a rambling three-story affair with some rococo additions; the basic design was rather vaguely Baroque. Some greenish creeper covered much of the outer wall and almost all of the gatehouse. The inner grounds were an unkempt wilderness of neglected fern and shrub. Hardly a cheerful place to die in, I reflected as my elderly Fiat plowed its way along the muddy drive after a morning storm. Although we were well into autumn the weather had suddenly turned oppressive, and I noted with distaste almost approaching alarm the presence of clouds of great heavy insects, several of which crashed fatally into my windscreen, leaving nasty gray smears. It was nearly noon; I was the last to arrive. I noted with some amusement that the expectant beneficiaries

were all present although none of them lived nearer than Westminster. They looked like people who would take no chances.

John welcomed me with rather exaggerated bonhomie. It quickly turned out that one of his reasons for asking me was that he hoped I would join him and four others as pallbearers on the short procession to the local church and graveside. I nodded agreement, but thought he might have warned me: some people think they need only to have an idea to see it done. He introduced his wife Madeleine, a middle-aged charmer who looked well capable of getting her own way. Other so-called mourners included his elder sister Wanda and her husband Henry Marling, a beaky, avaricious looking pair. Then there was Reginald Bell, Emmanuel's other son-in-law via a daughter long deceased; and Eleanor Cavendish-Warren, some sort of cousin, who was clearly approaching her eighties.

We accomplished the business of the day as speedily as we could. A young male mute walked in front of the coffin, and all the women behind. Only the servants seemed genuinely moved; the family's tears were of the crocodile variety. Afterwards there was a buffet back at the villa, giving me a further chance to observe my fellow guests as they masticated their rather disgusting hot osso bucco and cold garlic sausage, followed by what seemed to be a bread pudding of extremely leaden texture. For me the coffee and strega were the only enjoyable part of the meal, and after that I was thinking of taking my leave when John, perhaps sensing this, came over to sit by me and offer another drink. Whatever else was in his mind couldn't seem to find expression, so to cover an awkward pause I asked:

"Who is the little man in black with the long hands and pale eyes?"

I gestured briefly at a sober figure dwarfed by the marble mantelpiece. He toyed solitarily with his coffee spoon. His well-cut coat was thigh-length and looked Edwardian; it was devoid of buttons or lapels. You couldn't help noticing his hands before anything else: perfectly formed, with elegant fingers, they seemed to have been borrowed from a man twice his size.

"That's Paul Binet. He sat at the back of the church."

"Interesting-looking fellow. Is he French?"

"Half that and half Spanish, I think. He kind of goes with the house. Father found him a few years ago in New York, working in one of the museums, and took him on as a sort of librarian-companion. It seems he specializes in occult manuscripts, of which we now have quite a collection at the expense of the family fortunes. Mostly quite unreadable and



unsaleable, I think. As a matter of fact, that was my main reason for asking you over."

So it was out at last. I tried to look politely inquisitive.

"I have to go back to London in a couple of days, and I'm afraid business must go on even in the presence of death." I mentally confirmed my previous impression of John as a sanctimonious hypocrite. "After all, there are thousands of quite valuable books here, and I'm a complete Philistine. The family is rather afraid that Binet may try to get his hands on the choicest items, and I wondered whether . . . well, whether you'd be free to put some sort of valuation on them, give us a quick indication, anyway." John was trying to smile. "You know, tell us which ones to lock away."

I raised an eyebrow non-committally. "I *could* do that, I suppose."

"I didn't want to offend you by offering a fee, though do say if you'd like one. I thought you might prefer to take your pick of the books, say five hundred quid's worth, or seven-fifty if you like. You might even enjoy yourself."

I pursed my lips. "It's an agreeable enough suggestion, and I'd be glad to spend a day or two at it. Especially with a bottle from your cellar to lay the dust at lunchtime. But what about Binet? Won't he resent my poaching on his territory?"

John instantly showed his true colours. "Binet be damned. He's a servant in this house, and he'll do what he's told. The fact is, we none of us trust him. Maddy thinks he was trying to set the old man against us. However, it's over now, before any harm of that kind could be done. I've already seen the will, though we have to wait for the formal reading tomorrow." He collected himself and looked a little sheepish. "I say, I'm delighted you'll help us. Are you sure you wouldn't prefer a proper business arrangement?"

I shook my head. "Your first suggestion will be fine, and I promise not to cheat. Five volumes of my choice, to a total not exceeding five hundred pounds."

I came back next morning at ten, only to learn that the family lawyer had been delayed in Milan by some urgent court case, so the family mourners had to hang on and were clearly not happy about it. Nor was I, as it meant we'd all have to lunch together. John wasn't in, so the butler showed me straight to the library, a tall musty room with a richly ornamented ceiling. Its walls were crammed with decorated oak shelving, two banks of which projected into the centre to be joined by an ornamental arch. Left alone with a flask of coffee, I opened some windows and set to work. Of the seven thousand-odd books in the room,

I quickly calculated that more than half were too modern to have any significant value; so I noted the position of the rest and got busy on them. Despite a certain orderliness—in some sections the Dewey system had been adopted—some sections seemed very curiously classified. Suddenly my attention was drawn by three bulky unabridged copies of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, in different ornamental editions. I stepped into the alcove which housed them, and found myself surrounded by a vast number of volumes on the occult, constituting in total so great a proportion of the library as to overbalance it completely. They ranged from paper-covered how-to-do-it manuals of conjuring tricks to a few privately printed volumes of black magic rituals, including an item which totally took my breath away, a complete seventeenth-century rubric for the black mass. There were books about spirit-raising, zombies and voodoo, human sacrifice, witchcraft through the ages, and every other aspect of the supernatural you might think of in a nightmare. An odd collection indeed to find in the house of a man just buried, who presumably might have gleaned from his library enough skills to transcend the barrier of death.

My attention was suddenly distracted by a light slapping or clapping noise. I was so concealed by the alcove that I might have been hiding there. I stepped out to find Binet standing at one of the open windows which surveyed the terrace. He had his long tapering hands half stretched out before him, almost as though he was applauding. I couldn't see any sense in the action at first, then I realized what he was doing. I have mentioned the very furry insects which banged and squashed themselves against the windshield of my car on my first arrival. It seemed now that there was a small swarm of them outside the window, and Binet was catching them in his hands! Not killing them with a clap, but capturing them in his deft long fingers, cupping them carefully one at a time, and transferring them to a kind of glass case which stood on a nearby desk, opening and closing it while he inserted the struggling insect with a stylish flick of his supple fingers. As I moved closer I could see fluttering inside the case half a dozen of the unpleasant creatures, and a couple more dead on the bottom. Suddenly he became aware of my presence and was so startled that he let his last captive free. It flew off into a dark green bush.

"What on earth do you want those things for?" I asked almost involuntarily.

His eyes rolled a little, his mouth opened silently, and he shook his head from side to side. "It is nothing," he murmured. "An experiment, only an experiment. And you? You were . . . looking for something?"

Something about the way he looked up at me suggested a dog which

knows it is about to be beaten; something else suggested a dangerous animal about to spring in its own defense. In that second Binet's whole personality seemed to be exposed. I knew that I could never forget the slightly hunched shoulders, the crew cut hair, the sallow complexion, the suspicion of an accent in his otherwise impeccable English diction. I judged him to be in his mid-forties, though there were aspects which might have made him twenty years younger or ten years older. I was repelled by the hatred which clearly seethed in his pale eyes. Yet I had no doubt whatever that he had cared more than any member of the family for the well-being of old Emmanuel. He had that distrust of outsiders which is the hallmark of the perfect servant. Blood may be thicker than water, but love is thicker than either, and devotion to duty is a kind of love. So I admired him; yet there was something unsettling about him. I feared him; yet I understood him. The truth is perhaps that I instinctively sensed between us a kind of empathy despite the fact that it would have been difficult to find two human beings more outwardly different. I stress the word empathy rather than sympathy. My feeling was only that somehow Binet and I were on the same plane. We would understand each other yet not necessarily agree. This feeling of mine, after only a few seconds of conversation, seems more than a little related to the curious events which followed.

I quickly discovered that even though John may have mentioned my likely presence in the library, he had not explained it. Privately cursing my college friend, I spun Binet a yarn about John's wanting to make use of the presence of an alleged expert to give a general view on the interest of the collection. Binet listened attentively but was clearly not convinced. He shrugged politely at my apology for trespassing on his preserves, and finally shook his head. "It is not your fault. Not at all. I am aware that they do not trust me." His eyes opened wider in private amusement, and the pupils gleamed. "But they may find that there is a small surprise waiting for them. And then the world will know whom Emmanuel really trusted."

There seemed no answer to so naïve a threat. The words had been delivered lightly, yet they chilled and silenced me. I thought afterward that perhaps he had not intended me to hear them. Perhaps the truth was that he did not care whether I heard them or not. Abruptly he turned from me and left the room, making no more noise than the breeze which whistled outside among the cypresses. As the door closed behind him, my eyes fell to the strange little glass case in which a few insects still struggled while five now lay dead. I forced myself to examine the species more closely. Horrible things they were, something over an inch long,

with long jointed flealike legs, a furry abdomen and wavering antennae. What could be Binet's purpose in collecting such revolting objects? Deciding that more prolonged study of them would spoil my appetite for lunch, I made to return to my task. As I did so, my hand touched a book which was lying open on the corner of Binet's desk. It was in French. The title was *La Transférance du Mort*.

The funeral had been on a Wednesday. I worked on the library throughout Thursday and the first part of Friday. It was toward lunch-time on that day the bombshell dropped. I was aware that the lawyer from Milan had arrived, and that he was in conclave with the family. It had just occurred to me to wonder whether the will had contained any surprises when I heard the scrape of several chairs on the parquet floor upstairs. As I crossed the hall with the intention of washing my hands and taking a stroll before lunch, John came running down the staircase in an excess of bad temper. His face was like a thunderstorm. He had to say something as I innocently confronted him. What he said was: "Binet's got it! The whole damn lot! May the old man rot in hell!"

I never sought the whys and wherefores of the business. There was no putting up with the gloomy vindictiveness of the family any more than with the gleeful triumph of Binet. As I packed up, taking with me only two books instead of the five agreed, John told me merely that two wills had been found. The first gave the house to John and divided the fortune fairly evenly between him and the rest of the family, with a decent but not overwhelming bequest for Binet. The second and later document, lodged with the lawyer only weeks before the old man's death, left everything, apart from small gifts and charitable donations, unconditionally to Binet. Not only did the family fail to get what they expected, none of them was even mentioned.

For the next month or more my literary researches took me only briefly to London; then I was off again to Liechtenstein, San Marino, and finally Copenhagen. Occasional phone calls to friends kept me current with what was happening in the Binet affair. Predictably, the will was being contested by the family on the grounds that the old man was of unsound mind when he made it. I passed through Florence in early December, and once drove past the old house, but it seemed empty, though the old padre whom I met in the street told me that so far as he knew Binet was still in residence. Just in time for Christmas I flew home. Among the letters awaiting me was a note from John to let me know that the second will had been successfully revoked, and that Binet had been given notice to quit.

It was during that night that the dream came to me. I would have attributed it to tiredness, overeating or incipient influenza had it not been so very vivid, like a beautifully photographed film. It began with Binet's face, in what I suppose I have to call close-up. Heavily shadowed, malign, evil. He was saying something which I could not quite catch, but then the "camera" drew back and there was I, with my back to it, listening to him. We were in the library of the Villa Fabricotti, standing near his desk by the window. He wore what appeared to be the same black suit, the one with no lapels, and rather to my surprise he seemed to be drunk. With the curious certainty of dreamers I ascribed his condition, for some unknown reason, to the effects of calvados. Some of the shelves were empty, but the occult section was undiminished. Most of the furniture was thick with dust. Even in my dream the atmosphere was unbearably claustrophobic: I longed to get out into the fresh air. A small bed in the corner had been slept in but not made up.

"You live very simply," I said, my voice echoing around the room.

Now I could hear him. "Simply, my friend?" he hissed. "It is the others who are simple. Binet won before, and he will win again. You know my plan. Now I shall carry it out!"

"Plan?" I said vaguely. "What plan do you mean?" But he had already turned away to the desk, and when he faced me again his hands held the wooden box with glass panels in which I had seen him trap the gray insects. I took a step backwards in revulsion, but it was full of the damned things still.

"I shall show you, my friend," said Binet almost maniacally, "what good friends these creatures are, how they help to ensure that justice is done. The Hilarys think they have won, but my reach is longer than they can imagine. Watch!"

I can't remember exactly how he did it without freeing all the insects, but suddenly he selected one and held it by the wings, so it struggled between the fingers of his left hand. A truly monstrous sight in the precise detail now afforded to me. With his free hand Binet drew from some part of his clothing a long pin.

"What the devil . . ." I exclaimed.

Binet smiled, almost sweetly. "Precisely," he said, driving the pin through the body of the insect, which reacted violently before shuddering into lifelessness. "You see before you the remains of Mr. John Hilary!"

I was truly shocked. "You raving lunatic!" I said viciously.

Binet grinned foolishly at me, sweat standing out on his forehead as he held aloft on its pin his little victim. "We shall see," he murmured with

a sudden appearance of exhaustion. "And now, my friend, I think you had better leave . . ."

Suddenly I was running in fear down the overgrown drive, and behind me I heard insane, helpless, convulsive laughter which I knew to be Binet's. In my mind's eye I saw him opening a drawer in which, carefully laid out on white silk, were six small circles of coloured material, edged with darker thread. On one of these he laid the insect he had killed, and closed the drawer. Superimposed on this image there faded in an old-fashioned newsboy walking quickly through the streets, waving at passersby and shouting: "JOHN HILARY DEAD! JOHN HILARY DEAD!"

I woke up at this point, and hurried for a bath as hot as I could stand it. Anything to wipe away the memory of that dream. I took my long-suffering wife, who had by agreement retired before my midnight arrival, a cup of tea. She promised breakfast in thirty minutes. Meanwhile, still obsessed by the dream, I felt that I must try to contact John Hilary and see that he was in good health. It worried me that much. I had his Haywards Heath number in my book, and dialed it twice, but there was no reply. I looked up the London phone book but there were five John Hilarys. By the time breakfast was ready I was feeling somewhat calmer, but as my wife poured the tea she remarked, after asking about my trip home:

"By the way, didn't you say something last time you were home about meeting some people called Hilary? John and Madeleine?"

I nearly burned my mouth on the tea. "Yes. I went to his father's funeral. What about them?"

"I'm sorry to say they were killed in an air crash. It was in yesterday's paper. I kept it for you."

I grabbed the newspaper with an apparent rudeness which astonished my wife. There indeed were their names, among thirty-eight victims of the Paris air crash I'd heard about, with enough further detail to identify them beyond doubt.

All shocks fade. I had ceased to think very much about the event, and had almost forgotten my dream, when in mid-January I noticed in the *Times* obituaries the rather unusual name of Eleanor Cavendish-Warren. There was no doubt that she was the Hilary I had met; though seventy-eight, she had died suddenly and unaccountably while wintering on Cap Ferrat. Later in the month I read casually of a fatal car accident involving one Henry Marling and his wife. It took me a whole afternoon to remember where I had heard the name before. I felt like a man trapped in a recurring nightmare. Of all the beneficiaries under old Emmanuel's will, only one was still alive: Reginald Bell. I had to warn him, yet I knew

almost nothing about him. Remembering, I thought, his saying that he was an architect, I finally tracked him down to an office in the city. His secretary when she answered was reserved, sorrowful, and proper. She was sorry to tell me that only two days ago her employer had succumbed to a heart attack while holidaying on a Nile cruise.

I was afraid to go back to Florence. I was afraid of meeting Binet. It was the end of May before I made the journey, on account of a final piece of research which could only be achieved there. My wife came with me: not exactly for protection, but because I didn't want even to think about my previous visit. On arrival, however, the city and countryside seemed so serene that my fears vanished, and two days later I was recklessly driving along the main street of Monte Pareto, approaching the gateway to the Villa Fabricotti. My sensitive stomach rumbled distinctly as I pulled up near a sign informing me that the place was to let or for sale.

I asked some nearby workmen if they knew that had happened to Paul Binet. Yes, they said, he was dead. Found in the grounds on the morning he was due to pack up and go. Stiff as a board, with a purple face and a terrible expression on it. They didn't know what happened to the books, but a lot of the articles from the house, apart from the very valuable ones which had been taken away, had been put up by the lawyers for sale through a local merchant.

I found the shop without difficulty, and wandered uneasily around it. I recognized odd pieces of occasional furniture, including a wrought-iron standard lamp which had been in the hall. I was about to leave when in a corner, resting on the second shelf of a whatnot, I glimpsed an object which riveted me to the spot. Despite my revulsion I had to walk over and pick it up. It was a glass dome about six inches high, and its contents had last been seen in my dream. Sticking up from the base on a wire frame were arranged what might have been six tiny, grotesque dolls. They wore gaily coloured capes, and looked as though they were about to play ring-a-ring-a-roses. At first and even second glance it was possible not to notice that the dolls were really insects.

## Weird Tales

Fred Chappell

*Fred Chappell was born in Canton, North Carolina in 1936. He took degrees in English literature at Duke University, and he currently teaches science fiction and other subjects at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro. To date Chappell has published eight volumes of poetry, five novels, and Moments of Light, a collection of short stories which includes one about Franz Joseph Haydn as a space traveler. Formerly quite active in science fiction (he wrote for Robert Silverberg's Spaceship and Harlan Ellison's Dimensions), Chappell is now far better known (and widely respected) in literary circles.*

*His novel Dagon, although totally overlooked by fantasy/horror fans in the United States, was a critical success in literary circles and highly regarded in its French translation. Dagon is a rendering of the Cthulhu Mythos in modern literary terms. It is also the best novel ever written in this subgenre. Bar none. Fred Chappell's story "Weird Tales" is an homage to two of the writers he most admires. It is also an uncanny blending of fact, supposition, and paranoia. This is not the usual Cthulhu Mythos tale, despite the use of Lovecraft and others of his circle as actual characters. Don't read it if you're feeling depressed.*

THE VISIONARY POET Hart Crane and the equally visionary horror story writer H. P. Lovecraft met four times. The first time was in Cleveland on August 19, 1922, in the apartment of a mutual acquaintance, the mincing poetaster Samuel Loveman.

It was an awkward encounter. Loveman and four of his idle friends had departed around eleven o'clock to go in search of a late supper. Lovecraft was sitting in an armchair under the lamp, a calico kitten asleep in his lap. He declined the invitation to accompany the others because he would not disturb the kitten; cats were one of his numerous manias. Shortly before midnight, Crane blundered into the room. He was enjoying this night one of his regular fits of debauchery and was quite drunk.

"Lo," he said, "I'm Crane. Where's Sam?" He took no notice of



Lovecraft's puzzled stare, but raked a half-dozen volumes of Rimbaud from the sofa, lay down and passed out.

Lovecraft was quite put off, though the poet's quick slide to oblivion had spared him a dilemma. He would have had to rise in order to present himself, and thus awaken the cat. Lovecraft insisted upon precise formality of address; it was part of his pose as an eighteenth-century gentleman sadly born into the Jazz Age. He was a fanatic teetotaler, and Crane's stuporous condition filled him with disgust.

When Loveman and two companions returned a half hour later the cat had awakened and Lovecraft set it gently on the floor, rose, and walked to the door. He paused and pointed a finger at Crane, at the ungainly form overpowered with gin and rumped by the attentions of sailors. "Sir," he said to Loveman, "your friend is a *degenerate*."

The effect of this melodramatic sentence was marred by the quality of Lovecraft's voice, a tremulous squeak. Loveman giggled. "Then I'm a degenerate too, HPL," he said. "Maybe we all are. Maybe that's why no one takes us seriously."

Lovecraft's reply was a toss of his unhandsome head. He closed the door and walked out into the night, walked the seventeen blocks to the YMCA, to his cheerless room and narrow bed. He undressed and, after carefully laying his pants between the mattress and springs for pressing, fell asleep and began to dream his familiar dreams of vertiginous geometries and cyclopean half-gods, vivid dreams which would have been anyone's else's sweat-drenched nightmares.

After two days Lovecraft and Crane met again and attended a chamber music concert. Crane was sober then and Lovecraft was quite charmed by his company.

It was an odd group of literary figures, these poets and fiction writers stranded like survivors of shipwreck on what they considered the hostile strand of American philistinism. They were not much congenial in temperament or purpose, but they all shared a common interest in newly discovered, newly reconstructed, mythologies. They felt the need to posit in history powerful but invisible alien forces which had made contemporary civilization such an inhumane shambles.

Lovecraft's mythos is the most widely known. In a series of fictions soon to appear in the venerated pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, he told of several eras of prehistory when mankind vied with monstrous races of creatures with extraordinary powers for a foothold upon the Earth. Man's present dominance was accidentally and precariously achieved; those alien beings were beginning to rearise from their dormancy. Lovecraft delineated a cosmos that threw dark Pascalian doubt on the proposition

“that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all.”

Hart Crane's mythology was not systematic; in fact, it was hardly articulate. His sensibility was such that he was unnerved in his brushes with the ancient presences he detected, and he could not write or think clearly about them. But his old friends were interested to note in his later poems the occurrence of such lines as “Couched on bloody basins, floating bone/ Of a dismounted people . . .” Crane believed that Poe had gained best knowledge of the Elder Dominations and so paired him with Whitman in *The Bridge* as a primary avatar of American consciousness.

The most thorough and deliberate of these mythologers was Sterling Croydon, who might have stepped from the pages of one of Lovecraft's stories. He was such a recluse that not even Samuel Loveman saw him more than once or twice a month, though he occupied an apartment in the same building with Loveman, on the floor above. Croydon rarely ventured from his rooms; all those volumes of mathematics, physics, anthropology, and poetry were delivered to his door, and he prepared his scant meals with spirit lamp and hotplate. He was gracious enough to allow occasional visitors, never more than two at a time, and Loveman would spend an evening now and then listening to Croydon elaborate his own system of frightening mythologies. He had been excited to learn that Lovecraft was coming to visit in Cleveland, abandoning for a week his beloved Providence, Rhode Island, and spoke of a strong desire to meet the writer. But when Lovecraft arrived, Croydon withdrew, fearing, no doubt, that to meet the inheritor of Poe's mantle would prove too great a strain on his nerves.

He didn't appear a nervous or high-strung person, but rather—like Lovecraft—a formal gentleman and the soul of composure. He was fastidious and kept himself neatly dressed in dark wool. He imagined that he was painfully photosensitive and ordinarily resorted to dark glasses. His complexion was pale and often flushed, his frame slender almost to point of emaciation, his gestures quick but calculated. Yet there was a dreamy magnificence about him and when he held forth on various points of Boolean algebra or primitive religion Loveman felt that he was in the presence of strong intellect and refined character, however neurasthenic.

It was Croydon's contention that his colleagues had but scratched the surface of the problem. He had read Tylor, Sir James Fraser, Leo Frobenius and had traced their sources; he knew thoroughly the more

radical attempts of Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, Hazel Heald, F. B. Long, and others, but considered that they had done no more than dredge up scraps and splinters. He was convinced that one of Lovecraft's principle sources, the *Pnakotic Manuscripts*, was spurious, and that his descriptions of such cruel gods as Nyarlathotep and Yog-Sothoth were biased and vitiated by sensationalism and overwrought prose style.

He did not claim, of course, to know the whole truth. But he did know that Riemann's concept of elliptical geometry was indispensable to a correct theory and that the magnetic fluxions of the South Pole were important in a way no one had thought of. He had been eager to apprise Lovecraft of these ideas and of others, but at the last hour his shyness overcame him. Or maybe he had come to doubt the writer's seriousness.

We are forced to speculate about the outcome of this meeting which never took place; it might well have been of great aid to us, bringing to public notice Croydon's more comprehensive theories and engendering in Lovecraft a deeper sense of responsibility.

The one result we know, however, is that Croydon's life became even more reclusive than before. He almost never saw Loveman and his companions anymore, and no one was admitted now to his rooms. The single exception to this general exclusion was Hart Crane. Croydon thought that he saw qualities and capabilities in Crane lacking in his coarser-grained friends, and he would receive the poet at any time of the day or night. Drinking himself only a little wine, blackberry or elderberry, he kept a supply of gin for Crane, who never arrived sober and who would not stay unless there was something to drink.

So it was to Crane that Croydon poured out all his certainties, theories, and wild surmises. Almost all of it would have made no sense to Crane and would be distorted by his fever for poetry and disfigured by alcoholic forgetfulness. Yet he was impressed by this anomalous scholar and bits and pieces of those midnight disquisitions lodged in his mind. Perhaps Croydon's talk impressed him in a way it might not have done if he had been sober. The poet was interested in pre-Columbian history, he had always had a yearning for Mexico, and he was particularly taken with Croydon's notion that the Toltec, Mayan, and finally the Aztec religions were shadowy reflections of historical events that took place when mankind inhabited the Antarctic, when that region was steamy carboniferous forest. Those jaguar gods and feathered serpents which ornamented the temples had become highly stylized and symbolic, Croydon said, but long long ago, when man and dinosaur and other indefinable races coexisted at the bottom of the world, the first of these carvings and paintings had simply been attempts to represent literal

appearance. Those creatures, and many others of less producible aspect, had lived among us. Or rather, we had lived among them, as animal labor supply and as food source.

Crane discounted most of Croydon's notions. He did not believe, for example, that dinosaurs could have been intelligent warm-blooded creatures who had attempted to dislodge the alien gods who ruled among them. He did not believe the dinosaurs had died because their adversaries had infected them with an artificial bacterium which had spread like wildfire, wiping out every major saurian species in three generations. But he was fascinated by Croydon's accounts of tribal religions in South and Central America, caught up by the exotic imagery and descriptions of ritual. Croydon was especially excited by an obscure tribe inhabiting the upper reaches of the Amazon who worshipped a panoply of gods they called collectively Dzhaimbú. Or perhaps they worshipped but one god who could take different shapes. Much was unclear. But it was clear that Croydon regarded Dzhaimbú as the most anciently rooted of religions, in a direct decent from mankind's prehistoric Antarctic experiences.

Crane was impressed too by another of Croydon's ideas. This scholar disagreed vehemently with Darwin's charming theory that man had learned speech by imitating the mating calls of birds. Not so, said Croydon; man was originally a vocally taciturn animal like the horse and the gorilla, and like horse and gorilla uttered few sounds except under duress of extreme pain or terror. But these sounds they learned to voice quite regularly when Dzhaimbú inflicted upon them unspeakable atrocities, practices which Croydon could not think of without retching. Human speech was merely the elaboration of an original shriek of terror.

"'S a shame, Sterling," Crane said, "that you can't board a ship and go down to the jungle and investigate. I bet you'd turn up some interesting stuff."

Croydon smiled. "Oh, I wouldn't bother with the jungle. I'd go to the Antarctic and look for direct archeological evidence."

Crane took another swallow from his tumbler of neat gin. His eyes were slightly unfocused and his face was flushed and his neck red in the soft open collar. "Shame you can't go to the South Pole then, if that's where you want to go."

"No, I shouldn't make a very able sailor, I think," Croydon said. "But, after all, there are other ways to travel than by crawling over the globe like a termite." And now he launched into a description of what he called spatial emplacement, by which means a man sitting in his room might visit any part of the Earth. All that was required was delicate manipulation of complex and tenuous mathematical formulae, prediction of solar

winds, polar magnetic fluxions, cosmic ray vectors, and so forth. He began to pour out a rubble of numbers and Greek letters, all of which Crane disregarded, suspecting that they'd struck now upon the richest vein of his friend's lunacy. Croydon's idea seemed to be that every geographical location in the universe could be imagined as being located on the surface of its individual sphere, and that the problem was simply to turn these spheres until the desired points matched and touched. Touched, but did not conjoin; there would be disaster if they conjoined. The worse complication was that these mathematical spheres, once freed of Euclidean space, were also free in time. One might arrive to inspect Antarctica at the time he wished, which would be pleasant indeed; or he might arrive in the future, uncountable millennia from now. And that would be dangerous as well as inconvenient.

But all this murmur of number and mathematical theory had lulled Crane. He was asleep in the club chair. Croydon woke him gently and suggested that he might like to go home.

"Yeah, maybe I better," Crane said. He scratched his head, disheveling again his spiky hair. "But say, Sterling, I don't know about this travel by arithmetic. Better to get a berth on a ship and sail around and see the birds wheel overhead and the slow islands passing." The thought struck his enthusiasm. "That's what we'll do one of these days. We'll get on a ship and go see these jungles."

"Good night, Hart," Croydon said.

This impulsive voyage was never to take place, of course, Crane's poetry had begun to attract important critical notice, and he soon moved to New York in order to further his melancholy but highly distinguished literary career.

Croydon remained behind to pursue his researches ever more intensively. He was quite lost sight of to the world. Loveman would occasionally stop by to call but was not admitted.

It was on one of these infrequent visits that he felt a strangeness. The hall leading to Croydon's room seemed chilly and the air around the door very cold indeed. And the door was sweating cold water, had begun to collect ice around the edges. The brass nameplate was covered with hard frost, obliterating Croydon's name.

Loveman knocked and knocked again and heard no sound within but a low inhuman moan. He tried the icy knob, which finally turned, but could not force the door inward. He braced his feet, set his shoulder against the door and strained, but was only able to get it open for the space of an inch or two. The noise increased—it was the howling of

wind—and a blast of numbing air swept over him and he saw in that small space only an area of white, a patch of snow. Then the wind thumped the door shut.

Loveman was at a loss. None of his usual friends was nearby to aid him, and he would not call upon others. He belonged to a circle in which there were many secrets they did not wish the larger world to know. He returned to his rooms on the lower floor, dressed himself in a winter woolen jacket and scarf and toboggan. After a brief search he found his gloves. He took a heavy ornamental brass poker from the hearth and returned to Croydon's door.

This time he set himself firmly and, when he had effected a slight opening, thrust the poker into the space and levered it back. The poker began to bend with the strain and he could feel the coldness of it through his gloves. Then the wind caught the edge of the door and flung it back suddenly and Croydon found himself staring into a snowy plain swept over by fierce Antarctic wind.

It was all very puzzling. Loveman could see into this windstorm and feel some force of the wind and cold, but he knew that what he felt was small indeed as compared to the fury of the weather he could see into. Nor could he advance physically into this landscape. He could march forward, pushing against the wind, he could feel himself going forward, but he did not advance so much as an inch into that uproar of ice and snow.

It is in another space, he thought, but close, very close, to my own.

He could see into it but he could not travel there. In fact, with the wild curtains of snow blowing he could see little, but what he could see was terrible enough.

There, seemingly not twenty feet from him, sat Croydon at his desk. The scholar was wearing only his burgundy velvet dressing gown and gray flannel trousers and bedroom slippers. The habitual dark glasses concealed his eyes, but the rest of his face was drawn into a tortured grimace.

Of course Loveman shouted out *Croydon Croydon!* knowing it was useless.

He could not tell if his friend was still alive. He did not think that he could be. Certainly if he were in the same space as this Antarctic temperature, he must have died a quick but painful death. Perhaps he was not in that space but in a space like Loveman's own, touching but not conjoining this polar location. Yet the Antarctic space intervened between them, an impassable barrier.

He wished now that he had paid more attention when Croydon had

spoken of his mathematical ideas. But Loveman, like Crane, had no patience with, no talent for, numbers. He could never have understood. And now those pages of painstaking calculation had blown away, stiff as steel blades, over the blue ice sheets.

He thought that if he could not walk forward then he might crawl, but when he went to his knees he found himself suspended a couple of feet above the plane of the floor. Something was wrong with the space he was in. He stood, dizzily, and stepped down to the floor again, and the descent was as hard a struggle as climbing an Alpine precipice.

There was no way to get to Croydon, and he wondered if it would be possible to heave a rope to him. If he could find a rope.

But there was no way to reach the scholar. He had begun to recede in space, growing smaller and more distant, as if caught in the wrong end of a telescope. And the polar wind began to effect a bad transformation. The dressing gown was ripped from Croydon's body and he was blackening like a gardenia thrown into a fire. His skin and the layers of his flesh began to curl up and peel away, petal by petal. A savage gust tore off his scalp and the blood that welled there froze immediately, a skullcap of onyx. Soon he would be only a skeleton, tumbled knob and joint over the driving snow, but Loveman was spared this spectacle. The frozen figure receded more quickly and a swirl of ice-grains blotted away the vision. Croydon was gone.

Loveman made his way into the hall, walking backward. His mouth was dully open and he found that he was sweating and that the sweat had begun to ice his clothing.

There came a crash as of thunder, the smell of ozone, and the Antarctic scene disappeared from the room and there was nothing there. Literally, nothing; no furniture, no walls, no floor. The door with Croydon's nameplate hung over a blue featureless abyss. There was nothing, no real space at all.

Loveman gathered his courage, reached in, and pulled the door closed. He went quietly down the hall, determined to get back into his own room before others showed up. He did not want to answer questions; he did not want anyone to know what he knew. He wanted to go to his room and sit down and think alone and reaffirm his sanity.

The disappearance of Croydon and of that part of the apartment building caused some little public stir. The recluse had no relatives, but scientists were interested as well as the police. Loveman avoided as best he could any official notice, and in a few months the event was largely forgotten, since the scholar's room returned to its original state, everything restored but Croydon himself.

But the occurrence was not forgotten by the circle of Loveman's friends. For them it was a matter of great concern. They feared that Croydon's experiment had called attention to themselves. Would not those alien presences whose histories they had been studiously examining now turn their regard toward Cleveland? Had he not disturbed the web of space-time as a fly disturbs a spiderweb? It was true that they were indifferent to mankind, to species and individual alike. But there were some researchers who thought, as Lovecraft did, that the ancient race was planning a regeneration of its destiny and would act to keep its existence secret until the moment was ripe. The powers of these beings were immense; they could destroy where and when they pleased, as casually as a man crushes out a cigarette in an ashtray.

Loveman wrote about Croydon to Crane in New York, but his reference was veiled, seemingly offhand. "You have heard about C, I take it. We are all aware. Always good to keep your guard up, old chum. Word to the wise meanwhile. I wonder, you wonder."

It was actually at this early juncture that it all began to come apart; though the pursuit among the seers and poets was leisurely by human measure, it was relentless.

Lovecraft died in 1937, in painful loneliness. The official medical report listed the cause as intestinal cancer. Hart Crane's more famous death had taken place five years earlier, the celebrated leap into the sea.

The men had since met twice again, during the period of what Lovecraft had called his "New York exile." He was a little shocked at the changes in Crane's physical condition. "He looks more weather-beaten & drink-puffed than he did in the past," Lovecraft wrote to his aunt, "tragically drink-riddled but now eminent." He predicted that Crane would find it difficult to write another major work. "After about three hours of acute & intelligent argument poor Crane left—to hunt up a new supply of whiskey & banish reality for the rest of the night!"

Lovecraft records this encounter as taking place May 24, 1930. They were not alone and had no opportunity to talk privately, so that Crane would not have told the other what he had learned from Loveman of the circumstances of Croydon's death. He could not apprise Lovecraft that he alone was inheritor to Croydon's secret knowledge and that his identity must necessarily be known to that being, or series of beings, Dzhaimbú. He spoke of leaving New York and moving to Charleston, but Lovecraft did not pick up the hint, merely agreeing that such a move



might be beneficial. Perhaps Crane's gallantry prevented his placing the other in danger.

Another interpretation is possible. We may guess that Crane did communicate some of his information to the horror story writer. It is just at this period that Lovecraft's mythos began to take its more coherent and credible shape in such works as "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" and "The Dreams in the Witch House." Certainly both Lovecraft and Loveman remarked that Crane now lived in a state of haunted terror, wild and frightful, dependent upon alcohol to keep his fear manageable. Crane must have known that he was being pursued—the signs were unmistakable—and decided to face the terror on its own ground. For this reason he plotted to get the Guggenheim grant which would take him to Mexico.

But it was too late, alcohol and drugs had disordered his nervous system, his strength was gone. On the voyage to Mexico he met the celebrated bacteriologist, Dr. Hans Zinsser, and concluded that he was an agent of Dzhaimbú sent to infect humanity by means of typhus-ridden rats. Zinsser's motives in dumping infected rats into the harbor at Havana remain unknown, but it is hardly probable that Crane's suspicions were correct.

In Mexico the poet's behavior was uncontrolled and incomprehensible, a series of shocking and violent incidents that landed him often in jail and caused his friends to distrust any sentence he uttered. His decision to meet the terror face to face was disastrous; he could not stand up under the strain. No man could. And his further decision—to keep his knowledge and theories secret so as not to endanger others—was a worse disaster.

In the end, he fled, unable to face the prospect of coming close to the source of the horror. The voyage home began with dreams and visions so terrifying that he could not bear to close his eyes and stayed awake drinking continuously. Embarrassing episodes followed which he was numbly aware of but past caring about. On April 27, 1932, Hart Crane jumped from the railing of the *Orizaba*. The sea received him and the immense serpentine manifestation of Dzhaimbú, which had been following in the unseen depths of the water since the ship departed, devoured him.

*This fabulous shadow only the sea keeps.*

It is inevitable that we read these sad histories as we do, as a catalogue of missed opportunities and broken communications. A present generation righteously decries the errors of its forefathers. But it is unlikely that

any human effort would have changed the course of events. There would still have come about the reawakening of Dzhaimbú and the other worse gods, under whose charnel dominion we now suffer and despair.



## The Wardrobe

Jovan Panich

*Jovan Panich was born January 24, 1960 in Birmingham, England, where he currently resides. Of himself, Panich writes: "My mother is English and my father Yugoslav, hence the strange name. I've always had a love of science fiction, fantasy and horror, and when I was young I'd hunt all the local magazine shops for Marvel comics, which were superior to anything being published in Britain. I then moved on to books without pictures and read every Moorcock book in print. Other authors followed, Howard, Lovecraft, Leiber, and Tolkien to name but a few." His current favorites include Ramsey Campbell and Stephen King, whose works have influenced his own writing.*

*Panich has been writing since he was about seven, but only in the last few years has he written anything with a serious intention to see it in print. "The Wardrobe" was originally submitted to Mary Danby for one of the Fontana Book of Horror Stories. Panich later sent it to Lari Davidson, editor of the Canadian magazine, Potboiler, who had Panich revise the story several times before accepting it. Panich has had two other stories published in Potboiler, and another, "Miala," is set for a forthcoming issue of Undinal Songs.*

THE CAR CAME to a halt beside the curb. The wipers juddered on the windscreen in shivering arcs, wiping away the last few drops of rain that still fell from a sky the color of iron.

The doors swung open and a man, a woman, and two boys climbed out. They all were dressed in black and looked uncomfortable in the stiffly formal clothes. The youngest boy pulled at the collar of his shirt, trying to loosen its grip on his throat. He was guided gently toward the door of the house by his mother. She wore a small black velvet hat with a veil that could not hide her eyes. They were puffed and red with crying. She inserted a key into the lock and pushed open the door.

"Go upstairs and get changed, Andrew. We'll be in in a minute." She spoke in a voice that was little more than a whisper.

Andrew clambered up the stairs on all fours, glad to be allowed to change out of the uncomfortable clothes. He went into his room and sat on the bed, tugged off his tie and then fumbled with the top button of his shirt for a long time before he managed to undo it.

Andrew sat looking out of the window at the sky still heavy with clouds. It had rained steadily during Granny's funeral. It had been so strange and disorienting. All the flowers, bright and colorful, and the people so drab, black. There had been a man who had said some strange words that Andrew didn't understand, in a slow, solemn voice, but was only pretending to be sad. And Andrew had looked around at all the people, his uncles and aunts and cousins. They all stood silent and unfamiliar, so that he was uncertain if they really were the people they were supposed to be.

After the man had finished speaking, they had lowered the coffin into the hole in the ground. Andrew had watched fascinated as the coffin descended jerkily on the ropes, thumping lightly as it hit the wet earth at the bottom. He wondered what it must be like to be in the dark cold ground, trapped in a shiny wooden box. Why did Granny have to be put in the ground like that, with all the worms and beetles and slugs? What had she done wrong?

He remembered Granny, a kindly old woman who sat in her chair by the fire and gave him sweets when he visited her. He could never remember her being bad, not even when he had broken the blue china teacup. Why, then, was Granny put into the coffin? He had asked his father when they left the graveside and were walking back to the car.

"Because she's dead, Andrew. Sleeping for a long time."

Andrew knew what being dead was like. It was like the cat he had seen near the rubbish heap, all stiff and covered in maggots, with blood and slimy stuff on its face and a smell that made him feel sick. Would Granny be like that when she woke up? He thought of himself being picked up and kissed by a mouth that was cold and soft and wet like squashed worms.

He felt scared then and was glad that Granny was in her shiny box under the ground and a long way away. He hoped it would be a long, long time before she woke up, and perhaps she would have forgotten him by then.

He finished taking off his best clothes, pulled on his jeans and the yellow t-shirt with a red racing car on it. Then he slipped his feet into a pair of sneakers that had once been white, and with a look of concentration on his face, slowly tied the laces.

He heard the front door close and the rest of the family make their

way into the lounge. Andrew picked up his suit and went over to the big wardrobe in the corner of his room, carefully hung the suit on its plastic hanger, and closed the door with a sharp click. He stepped back, looking at the wardrobe as if he were only now seeing it properly for the first time.

The wardrobe dominated the small room. It was out of place. All the rest of the furniture was simple and modern, plain and unpretentious. But the wardrobe belonged to a time past, an Edwardian, or perhaps Victorian, setting, where all the colors were rich and dark, and the air heavy with the musty scent of long-dry lavender.

It was made of oak, stained such a deep brown so as to be almost black. The twin doors had brass handles and were covered in fluting and carving that was cut deep into the wood, with fluid designs of entwined leaves and vines that seemed more like writhing serpents . . . or things found far beneath the ground.

It stood in front of him, shiny and dark, like the coffin they had buried with Granny inside. But this coffin wasn't under a layer of heavy soil pressed firmly in its place, it was here with him, in his room. What if there was something else inside, apart from his clothes? Something that had been asleep for a very long time . . . but was now waking up?

Inside the wardrobe, Andrew's jacket slid from the hanger and slithered down the inside of the door like the feeble movements of an old woman.

Andrew turned and fled from the room, almost falling down the stairs in his haste to reach his parents. He flung himself into his mother's arms as she sat on the sofa by the fire.

He sobbed and gasped, unable to speak for a long time. At last the words came. "She's not dead now. She's woken up, but I shut the door. Mummy, I'm scared!"

"Andrew! What are you talking about?" his father snapped. The funeral of his wife's mother had already been enough of a strain without any more worries.

"In the wardrobe! She's in the wardrobe!" Andrew almost screamed.

"Who's in the wardrobe? The cat? Is it the cat stuck in the wardrobe?" Andrew's father asked.

"No! Granny! Or maybe somebody else, crawling in the bottom of the wardrobe. Maybe they were dead, but now they've woken up."

His own confusion calmed him, as he tried to express his thoughts with what words he knew.

Andrew's mother looked at him, and then put her head in her hands and began to cry softly.

"They're dead. Why do I have to be reminded?" Her voice was hardly more than a whisper.

"Madeleine. Don't cry, darling," Andrew's father said gently, then turning to his eldest son, said, "Stay with your mother, Gary. Andrew, let's go upstairs."

He took firm hold of Andrew's wrist and led him back to his bedroom. With a savage pull he opened the doors of the wardrobe and made Andrew look inside.

"See? Nothing but your clothes, including your best jacket screwed up like a dish cloth." He picked it up and replaced it on the hanger, doing up one of the buttons to hold it in place. "Now let's go back downstairs, and not another word to your mother, she's been through enough these past few days. You and Gary can go and play in the other room with your toys, quietly mind, no noisy games."

As the two boys walked meekly past their father in the hall, Gary, who was eight, and as curious as a kitten, asked, "What did Mum mean when she said they were dead?"

"Her mother and father of course." He answered quietly, but he looked away even as he spoke and quickly stepped back into the lounge, shutting the door firmly.

Peter could still picture that day, a bright morning in early August. He had decided to decorate the spare room in readiness for the baby Madeleine was carrying. A little brother or sister for Gary. He had been moving the wardrobe out on to the landing, a slow and difficult job because of the wardrobe's size and weight. Madeleine had come out of the bedroom, seen him struggling, and asked if she could help. He had laughed, and replied, "In your condition?" and patted the prominent lump. And then he had lifted the wardrobe up at one end, slid it along the carpet. Somehow he lost his balance, stumbled, and it had toppled forward, pinning Madeleine against the wall. She screamed, a cry that had made his heart freeze. When he pulled the wardrobe away he thought she was dead, there was so much blood. The child had been a little girl.

Now the memory had been reawakened, and Peter wondered, deep down inside in a small and secret place, if there was perhaps something evil about the wardrobe.

The months passed, and the incident of the wardrobe was all but forgotten by Andrew. He still felt nervous about being in the room alone sometimes, and he would then have to open the wardrobe doors and slide the clothes to one side. After he had carried out this inspection and

decided that there was nothing hiding inside, he was quite happy to stay in the room. And after a time it became more like a ritual, akin to not stepping on the cracks between paving stones, devoid of any real meaning.

One evening in late autumn, Andrew was playing in his room with his electric train set. It was almost dark inside the room, only a hint of the afternoon still lingered in the patch of sky outside the window, but Andrew hadn't switched on the light because his new train had tiny headlights and illuminated carriages. In the gloom it looked almost like a real train as it hurtled round the track with its headlamps glinting on the rails.

Something made him turn, some movement on the edge of his vision. He looked at the wardrobe. The doors were half open. In the space between the clothes and the bottom of the wardrobe he could see a head. The face was gray and crumpled with years and there were only black patches where the eyes and mouth should be. It leered at him.

He began to scream, too frightened to run to the light switch. He kept on screaming, and the train went round and round the track relentlessly.

His father ran in and switched on the light. "Andrew! What is it? Have you hurt yourself?"

"In the wardrobe, Daddy. A ghost! A ghost!" He pointed wildly at the wardrobe, at any moment expecting the thing to come shambling out.

His father padded over to the wardrobe in his worn brown slippers and pulled the door open wider. Andrew was ready to scream again but he saw his dread apparition revolve into a gray shirt and the toecaps of a pair of shiny black shoes. They lay at the bottom of the wardrobe, so mundane and natural in the clear electric light. He felt foolish.

His mother ran into the room. Her eyes were filled with concern. "What's happened? Is he all right? Are you all right, Andrew?"

She saw the open doors of the wardrobe. The concern vanished from her eyes and was replaced by fear. "It's that *thing* again. That bloody *wardrobe!* I know it is! It's . . ."

Quickly Peter rushed to her and put his arm around her shoulders. "Andrew's okay. He just got himself caught up with his train set. He got frightened, but I've seen to it. There's nothing to get worked up about."

Madeleine nodded. "I'm sorry. I thought . . ."

"Shush. Don't worry. Now go downstairs and finish getting tea ready. We're all starving."

He forced a smile, and slapped her playfully.

As soon as she was gone the smile vanished. He gestured to Andrew



to switch off the train. Slowly Andrew stood up and sat on the edge of the bed. His father sat down beside him.

“Now listen to me, Andrew, because I’m only going to say this once, and then we’re not going to mention it ever again. Understand?”

Andrew wet his lips with his tongue, and whispered, “Yes, Dad.”

“You saw what happened to your mother when she thought something had frightened you. You could see how scared and worried she got. It made her cry and feel bad. I know you love her and don’t want her to be upset . . .”

“It was the wardrobe, Dad. It frightened me again. I thought there was something inside it . . . like last time.”

“For God’s sake, Andrew! Don’t be stupid! It’s only a piece of furniture, like the table and chairs. You’re not frightened of those, are you?”

Andrew lowered his eyes and said nothing.

“Don’t you understand that you’re frightening your mother? The two of you are scaring one another to death, feeding on one another’s fears. It has got to stop. It *will* stop. Understand?”

“Yes, Dad.” Andrew answered in a small voice.

Peter, remembering that he was talking to his youngest son, who hadn’t yet reached his seventh birthday, sighed and tousled Andrew’s hair. “Okay, son. Let’s forget all about it and go and have something to eat.”

Andrew did indeed try and forget all about the wardrobe, and for a few weeks all was well. December came, and with it a cold spell. A thick frost on the lawn crackled like newspaper when Andrew walked on it, and ice patterns covered the kitchen window when he got up for school. Christmas was fast approaching, bringing with it a fervent excitement. He hoped that he would get the radio-controlled sports car he had asked for. He would be the envy of all the other boys in his class.

Each night when he got into bed he thought that another day was gone and Christmas had moved a little closer. He was happy and excited. Sleep did not come easily.

Sixteen days before Christmas he had a terrifying nightmare.

He was walking with his brother Gary on the way to school. Gary was telling him how well he had done in the long jump the previous day. “I managed this tremendous leap—must have been nearly ten feet—I thought I was flying.”

The two of them stepped through the doors leading to the classrooms. But they were suddenly in Andrew’s bedroom.

Gary seemed unaware of the transformation, he continued walking. He stopped at the wardrobe with his back toward it. The doors swung

slowly and silently open. Andrew tried to speak, but his mouth seemed as if it were filled with a wad of cotton, and fear crushed his ribs. In his arms there was suddenly a great slab of cold granite, a gravestone, its inscription weathered and worn into an unreadable shadow. The stone was covered with lichen and damp earth . . . and something else. Wriggling maggots, fat and white, writhed blindly toward his fingers.

With a shuddering moan of loathing, Andrew threw the thing away from him. Gary's eyes went wide with horror as the heavy stone sailed toward him. It thudded into his chest. He fell backwards into the gaping blackness of the wardrobe, where something waited . . . The doors slapped shut.

Andrew woke up. The door of the wardrobe swung shut with a soft click that seemed to echo like a gunshot. Terror returned like a cat pouncing on its prey. He almost screamed, but his body was rigid, constricted by a breath that couldn't escape.

After long minutes had passed he found the courage to slide his hand out from under the protective covering of the blankets and switch on the lamp. He wanted to call for his mother, but he remembered what his father had said to him. He knew that he would have to remain silent. Andrew lay in his bed, staring at the wardrobe for a long time before uneasy sleep at last came to him.

In the comforting light of a bright, cold day, Andrew brooded on his nightmare, going over it again and again. Had it happened? Had the wardrobe doors swung shut when he had woken? He was certain the doors had been closed when he had gone to bed, and they were obviously closed now. The only possible answer was that he had still been half asleep after the nightmare had ended. One second asleep and dreaming the doors swinging shut, the next awake, and seeing the dark shape of the wardrobe in the beam of moonlight streaming through the gap in the curtains.

That afternoon he found Gary in the garden with his bicycle upside down. Gary was standing on the handlebars in an attempt to straighten them. Andrew rested his back against the fence and watched his brother.

Gary turned round and saw his brother shivering and watching. "You wouldn't feel cold if you were doing something instead of just watching. Stand on the other end of the 'bars and bounce up and down. With both of us together there might be enough weight to straighten it."

The two of them grunted and gasped, and eventually the metal bent back.

"Phew! That was hard work. How'd you manage to bend it like that?"

"I'd just finished delivering the papers and was on my way home, then

I hit a patch of ice on the corner of Bell's Lane. I went halfway across the road before I could grab the brakes and the bike went straight over and I landed on the handlebars."

He rubbed his chest.

"It doesn't half hurt. I bet I've got a great big bruise."

Andrew stared at his brother for a long time. "Gaz. I had a bad dream last night."

"That's nice. Get chased by a Dalek? Or was it a lump of man-eating purple jelly with fangs?" He made a face, showing his teeth.

"It wasn't anything like that. I dreamt that you fell inside the wardrobe in my bedroom . . ."

"Sounds really frightening," interrupted Gary.

"There was something in there . . . waiting. I don't know what, I never saw it, but it killed you," he finished lamely, unable to convey the sense of horror he felt.

"But you didn't fall into the wardrobe. I had this gravestone, it was all covered in maggots. I threw it away and it hit you . . . in the chest."

The laughter vanished from Gary's face. "You're lying. You made it up, didn't you? You're trying to scare me just like you scare Mum, with all that rubbish about the wardrobe. Well I'm not going to listen!" Fear was in his eyes, and he turned away, lest Andrew should see it. "I'm going in the house!"

Andrew stood watching as his elder brother walked away. He wondered if Gary would tell his mother and father. He doubted it. Gary wouldn't admit his fear even to Andrew, much less their parents. Andrew wondered if he should say something himself, but what could he say that wouldn't frighten his mother and enrage his father? Nothing. The only thing he could do was to forget all about the matter.

When Andrew was eleven, his bedroom changed. New carpet and curtains and wallpaper in mute pastel shades were exchanged for the bright, boisterous colors of childhood. Books and records replaced the toys. The electric train was long gone, broken and discarded, but the wardrobe was still there . . . unchanged.

The wardrobe now filled Andrew with terror whenever he was alone in his room. He began putting a chair in front of the doors each night, to make certain they could never come open while he was asleep. Gary never mentioned the nightmare again, not even to ridicule Andrew with it. In fact, it seemed to Andrew that all the family made a special point of not mentioning the wardrobe in any way at all.

He picked a moment when his father was alone. Gary was out with

his friends and his mother in town doing some shopping. He went into the lounge where his father sat in an armchair reading the newspaper.

Peter looked up as Andrew came in, saw by the look on his son's face that he wanted to ask something, and put his newspaper on the floor after carefully folding it in half.

"Dad, I wanted to ask you if I could have a desk in my room, so I'll have somewhere quiet to sit and do my homework."

"A desk? Well, I don't know. Your room's not very big to start with. Where are you going to put a desk?"

"It could go by the wall, between the door and the window."

Peter considered this for a moment, mentally measuring the length of the wall. "But what about the old wardrobe? It just about fills the space along that wall."

"We could have it taken out and put a proper fitted wardrobe in the alcove. That's what Darren Slater's got. He's got a desk and his room's a bit smaller than mine."

"Oh! I see it now," Andrew's father laughed. "But a desk would be useful, especially as you get older and have to do a lot more serious studying. I'll see what I can do about it. And with a bit of luck, you'll get a desk like Darren's or maybe better."

"Thanks, Dad!" said Andrew as he turned and all but swaggered out of the room.

Three days later, Peter went up to his youngest son's room. He found Andrew sitting on the bed, half-heartedly reading through his notes on the French Revolution for a coming exam.

Peter walked over to the wardrobe and stood with one hand resting on the polished wood. Andrew lifted his eyes from his book and nodded.

"There's a young bloke at the factory who's just got married and moved into a house in Waverley Road."

Andrew nodded.

"Well he's a bit short of money at the moment, not surprisingly, and he's looking around for furniture on the cheap. So I told him we'd got an old wardrobe he could have, if he collected it himself."

"What did he say, Dad?" Andrew asked, pushing his book under the bed.

"Oh. He said he'd have it. Said he'd be round Sunday afternoon with a mate of his who's got a Transit van."

Andrew swung round until he could see the wardrobe properly. At last it was going. But still he had to suppress a shudder.

The next day was Friday, and that afternoon when school was over,

Andrew and his mother took all the clothes out of the wardrobe and hung them in the white fitted wardrobe in his parents' room.

"It's a bit of a squeeze," said his mother, as she pushed her husband's gray three-piece suit along the rail in order to slide Andrew's duffle coat into the narrow space. "But we'll manage until we get you a new one."

After tea, Andrew and his father spent an hour wrestling the heavy wardrobe from its place against the wall and downstairs. The staircase was narrow and curved back on itself, so there was a lot of pushing and pulling and shouted instructions before they got the wardrobe out into the back garden.

Andrew's father brushed his hair out of his eyes with a dusty hand. "We could have done with Gary to give us a hand. This bloody thing's heavy enough to give me a hernia!"

Andrew rubbed his hands down the front of his jeans; there were two red lines across his palms where the edge of the wardrobe had dug into the soft flesh. But again they each took one end of the wardrobe. Like some ungainly giant crab they made their way into the shed with short, wobbly steps.

"That should do it," gasped Andrew, blowing air through his teeth with a soft whistling sound.

"Yep. You're right," his father said, as he tucked his shirt into his trousers. "It'll be okay in here, ready for Harry when he comes to collect it. Nice and close to the gate. I expect it'd rain if we left it outside. Come on then, let's go and see if your mother's got any orange juice in the fridge."

Andrew didn't follow him back indoors immediately. He lingered in the shed, studying the wardrobe. Suddenly, it seemed as dark and evil to him as when he had been a little boy. It was almost as if it were a living thing. Now that it was in the shed it was like a dangerous animal in a cage, trapped, but not nearly as deadly. He had the urge to taunt it.

"So you're going at last. After all these years of turning round with a gasp when I thought some hideous creature was going to leap out from inside you. I won't wake up in the middle of the night and see you looming there like the Gates of Hell!"

He raised his fist in a gesture of triumph . . . and the wardrobe gave a squealing creak, almost as if it were giving voice to its impotent fury.

Andrew's courage deserted him then. He ran out of the shed, slamming the door behind him and shot the bolt. He rushed indoors, his heart thundering madly against his ribs.

That night he experienced his nightmare again; the same nightmare

that had chilled his soul countless times before. But this time it was much worse. This time there were faces on the sides of the wardrobe, born from the patterning of the wood. They were demon faces, tattered and ragged, as if they had been sculpted in the wood but had run before drying, like candle wax. When Gary fell inside and the doors closed, awful crunching sounds could be heard, along with Gary's screams. They rose to a squealing howl which made Andrew's stomach and bladder convulse.

From the demon mouths blood began to pour, running down the sides of the wardrobe.

Andrew awoke, almost mad with fear. He scrambled out of bed making a low moaning noise. After long agonizing seconds of fumbling, his fingers found the light switch. He stood in the harsh brightness feeling ill. He felt a cold dampness and found that he had wet himself in his terror.

Andrew was sick as soon as he reached the bathroom. He made certain some of the vomit went down the front of his pajamas, hiding the stain of urine. His mother came running out of her bedroom and fussed over him.

"There, there, my poppet. Feeling better now?"

Andrew nodded, his face pale and sweat-streaked.

She wiped his face with a wet flannel and gave him a glass of water to drink. Andrew held the glass in his trembling hands, and the rim clinked against his teeth.

After he had changed, Andrew went back to his room and got into bed, but only after his mother had agreed to stay with him. She sat on a chair beside his bed and held his hand. A few minutes later his father came in. He stifled a yawn.

"Two o'clock in the morning, you pick the best time to be sick," he said, tying the belt of a faded red dressing gown around his waist. "What have you been up to?"

Andrew's fear made him reckless. He began telling his parents about his nightmare. When he had finished, his father stared at him with an angry look on his face.

"Don't you think it's about bloody time you forgot about that thing? You're not a little kid anymore! I swear to God, you must be barmy."

"Peter!" cried Madeleine, shocked by her husband's harsh words. "You're not helping him by shouting at him like this."

Peter said nothing, but stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind him. Madeleine put her hand on Andrew's brow and said gently, "You mustn't worry about what your father says. He doesn't really mean

it, you know. He's just worried about you, because he loves you. Everything will be better when that wretched wardrobe's taken away."

Andrew nodded, and buried his head in the pillow. He felt wretched.

The next morning Andrew got up early, glad to be out of the confines of his bedroom. Though the wardrobe was no longer there its presence seemed stronger. He gingerly stepped round the dark patch of carpet with the dirty line around it, the spot where the wardrobe had stood.

He went into the lounge and switched on the television. It was the Banana Splits Show, a repeat, but he didn't mind.

From the other room he could hear the sound of his mother and Gary talking. He couldn't quite catch what they said, but he somehow felt they were discussing him.

Gary came in and sat down on the arm of the settee. He began to twist himself from side to side, causing the settee to lift off the ground.

"Hey! Stop that, I'll tell Dad!" Andrew snapped indignantly as he lurched forward.

"Dad's not here. He's gone fishing. He couldn't bear to be in the same house as his barmy kid."

Andrew said nothing.

"I heard everything last night. You still believe all that rubbish about the wardrobe, don't you? I remember when you tried to scare me with your stupid story. 'Oooh! Gary, there's something in the wardrobe, Gary! It must be the bogeyman, Gary! I'm scared, Gary!'" he pitched his voice high and childlike.

Andrew still didn't answer, but he began to turn red with embarrassment.

Sensing his brother's discomfort, Gary went on, "I bet you were so scared you wet yourself!"

"Course I didn't! And anyway, I was only scared of it when I was a little kid. It'll be gone for good soon." He couldn't disguise the sense of relief he felt. Gary saw the fear he was trying to hide and said, "Come on outside, baby brother, and I'll show you there's no monster in the wardrobe waiting to get you. That's if you're not too frightened."

He left the challenge hanging in mid-air like a noose.

"Let's not bother, Gaz. I'm watching the telly." Andrew tried to turn his brother's thoughts to something else, but Gary was determined to extract the fullest enjoyment from his brother's phobia.

"You're scared! Chicken! You're shit-scared!" He began slapping the back of Andrew's head in time to his chanting.

Andrew lost his temper. He swung a fist at his brother, but Gary easily

blocked the wild swing and pulled Andrew onto the floor. He held him down with his knees on Andrew's shoulders.

"I'm telling you, you haven't got the bottle to go out there!" He slammed Andrew's head against the floor.

"Yes I have!" screamed Andrew, almost crying.

"Okay then, let's go!" Gary let go of his younger brother. Andrew stood up, rubbing the back of his head. Reluctantly, he followed Gary out into the back garden.

They halted in front of the shed, but only for a moment. Gary slid the bolt back, opened the door and stepped inside. Andrew stood outside peering in. Gary strode up to the wardrobe and pulled open the doors.

It seemed to Andrew that the interior was filled with smokey darkness. He couldn't see the back of the wardrobe.

"See, I told you there was nothing to be frightened of. It's empty," Gary called. Then he stepped inside.

Andrew was certain that Gary did nothing more than pull the door easily, yet it slammed shut with a bang that made his heart leap.

"Hey, Andy, open the door!" Gary's voice was muffled and strangely distant. "Come on. It's dark in here. I feel like I'm gonna suffocate."

"I never touched it, Gaz! I never touched it!" Andrew rushed in and tugged at the door handles as hard as he could. They refused to move. "Please come out, Gaz. I'm scared."

Slowly, so slowly, faces began to appear in the gleaming carvings of the wardrobe. They seemed to stare at Andrew, malevolent and hideous, tattered horrors from the darkest corners of his mind.

Andrew screamed as horrible scrabbling sounds came from inside. Gary's cry rose to a high-pitched howl.

Again Andrew tried to open the doors, but they were jammed impossibly tight. All the while the faces grinned at him, mocking his efforts.

Almost out of his mind with terror, Andrew looked wildly around the shed for something to open the doors with. His eyes briefly touched on the wooden mallet, the cold chisels with their red plastic handles, a claw hammer with one claw broken off. All seemed small and ineffectual.

Then he saw the axe propped up in one corner. He picked it up, heaved it onto his shoulder, and brought it down on the side of the wardrobe with all of his strength.

He smashed it again and again. The strength of madness pushed his young body to its limits. Wood splintered and cracked. From the mouths of the demon faces, blood poured, puddling on the floor.

"Andrew!"



His mother's scream from the doorway behind him brought him back to reality.

The doors of the wardrobe swung slowly open, and Gary's body fell out. It was gashed and covered in blood. His face was all but unrecognizable.

The faces laughed gleefully.

"God in Heaven!" screamed his mother, "What have you done?" She rushed to Gary's side, lifted his head and cradled it in her arms.

Andrew looked down at her, his face a mixture of horror and bewilderment. The axe fell from his nerveless fingers and thudded on the floor.

What was the matter with her? Couldn't she see the faces? The demon faces laughing and howling as the bright red blood ran from their mouths?

Couldn't she see the faces?

## Angst for the Memories

Vincent McHardy

*Canadian writer Vincent McHardy was born April 26, 1955 and currently resides in Agincourt, Ontario. Following a three-year term in anthropology at York University, McHardy eventually decided to try his hand at writing. His interest in fantasy and horror arose through his voracious reading appetite, which led him to devour everything from Doc Savage to Ray Bradbury. In the last few years, McHardy has written a great many short stories. Initially these were published in amateur or semiprofessional magazines—Quarry, Reader's Choice, Moonscape, The Horror Show, Etchings & Odysseys, and others. In the past year he has sold to Twilight Zone Magazine, Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine, as well as to several anthologies. The following story is from R. L. Leming's small press anthology, Damns; McHardy has a story also in the forthcoming follow-up More Damns. His story, "Keepsake," was reprinted in The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series XII.*

*Vincent McHardy is looking for a publisher interested in a collection of his short fiction, while he works away at his first novel, And Cancer For All. Ought to be some takers.*

"THOUGHT.

"It's so far away.

"I can't see. I can't feel. I can't live this way.

"Let me go.

"If I could touch something, or have a hand to touch something with, I could prove I exist. But there is nothing to point to. No sound. No heat. No pressure. No light. Nothing.

"Am I talking, or am I thinking? I don't feel lips moving. Where are those tender vibrations that would tell me I have a skull?

"Let me go.

"Whoever, whatever holds me here, let me go. Or tell me where I am. I could live knowing what happened. How I got here. Where this, here, is. I could live with that, and lie down and die.

"Ha! Lie down. I could be lying down now, or floating, or falling, or standing quite still. I can't tell. There are no boundaries in this world. I rush to the infinite. I contract to the infinitesimal.

"Let me go.

"End it.

. . . .

" . . . Here."

"What!"

"I'm here. Don't go."

"I won't go. I won't go. Where are you?"

"Nowhere. There was nothing to hold my mind until I found you."

"Then you're not the one holding me here?"

"No. I'm here with you."

"Then, who are you?"

"I'm not sure."

"You're part of my madness."

"I am not. I found you. I pulled you to me."

"Then tell me your name."

"It's been so long since I asked myself that question."

"Your name. Tell me!"

"I remember, Lloyd . . . Lloyd Pryce. Yes, Lloyd Pryce. A beautiful name. A glorious title for existing. Don't you think?"

"Yes."

"Lloyd. Lloyd. Lloyd. Oh, how I hated my name as a child. A child. I was a child. I grew up. Became a forest manager. Yes. Yes. I married Jennifer Cleary. We have four children. I . . . I want to go back. Oh Lord, please take me back. Don't leave . . . ."

"Shut up! Don't crawl. They want us to crawl."

"They?"

"Yes, they. Do you think this is natural? Someone has done this to us. Put us here. Blocked our senses. Disoriented us."

"It's possible."

"It's true, Lloyd. You broke their plans. You reached me."

"I had to. I'd reached bottom. I had to find somebody. Somebody? Who are you?"

"Well, I'm . . ."

"Come on. It shouldn't be difficult."

"Just a minute, will you . . . ?"

"Does it start with an A?"

"Please, let me think."

"Stop."

"Why not start with all the alphabet. It doesn't matter. Does it? Not to a . . ."

"ALEXANDER J. SCULLY! Druggist for thirty-five years, at Kirbie's Pharmacy. Divorced. No children. Graduated Danner University, with honors. And, to the best of my recollection, I had a very happy childhood."

"I'm sorry, Al. I thought you might be . . ."

"Might be what I thought you were?"

"Yes."

"We might be, Lloyd. Names don't prove we exist."

"They help. Before we named ourselves, we drifted. Names give us something to hold on to. Names will pull us out of here."

"How did you know I was out here? I sensed nothing."

"I *didn't* know you were out there. I drifted. How long I can't tell. Then something twitched. I felt there must be *something* out there. The darkness changed. I felt a thickness and thought, 'There it is.' And then you came."

"Nothing more than thought?"

"That's all it took, Al."

"Then we must remember. Develop links to our past. Our past will save us."

"Yes, that's it, Al. Try and remember your last day in the real world. I remember mine. I was on vacation, camping, up at Lake-of-the-Woods. We have a cabin up there. Jenny and the kids were up with me. I wanted to hike over to Gem Lake. You can only get there by foot. I went alone. It's a five-hour walk, too long for the children. I camped overnight. Ten hours of walking left little time for exploring. Nothing unusual happened. I reached the lake, explored, caught dinner and pitched a tent under a fine Norwegian pine. I read by the light of a Coleman till about one. After I turned out the light, I heard the sound of thunder. I remember thinking, oh, it's going to be a fine storm. The way summer storms are. I tried to stay awake, but the pounding tapped on and on. The storm was far away. It crept closer. I fell asleep listening. Now, I'm here."

"Nowhere."

"I wish I'd stayed awake."

"Listen, Lloyd. Listen to my last day outside."

"I'm all ears."

"I opened the pharmacy at seven-thirty, like always. The clerks were waiting for me. The papers came at seven-thirty-eight, our first customer at eight-o-six. The morning was slow. I ate the lunch I brought. The afternoon could have been the morning. At six-fifteen I went to the

Golden Wheel Restaurant next door and had supper. I came back and waited until ten before closing up. I live just across the street, so I was home in time to catch the early news. I filled my pipe, my only vice, and sat to watch. Bombings, revolutions and cold war politics. I'd seen it all before, like the world had and will again. The news didn't tell me anything new, so I drifted off, and beached up here."

"Al, we're dead."

"The hell we are!"

"It fits. You with your pipe, me in a lightning storm, we both could have fried in the night."

"Could, could, could. That's not proof. That's not even probable. I've been smoking a pipe for over thirty years, and I've learned that it's damned hard to keep lit. It's not like a cigarette. You've got to puff it, coddle it, make sure your spittle doesn't drown it. You concentrate to keep it going. Lloyd, that pipe was cold by the time I fell asleep.

"Now, what about that lightning? The tree you were sleeping under, it wasn't the only tree around?"

"I was in a forest."

"The tree wasn't the tallest tree in the forest?"

"No, it wasn't."

"So the danger was slight. Chances are, you didn't burn from lightning."

"But there is always a chance. When you hear that one in ten thousand will die in a car crash, you think, well, it won't be me. Those are just statistics. People are statistics! Some bodies *must* die to make those numbers add up. So why not you and me? Eh, Al? Who's to say we can't crap out on a dice roll? You fall asleep with a pipe that can't be lit with a blow torch, but tonight is special, one small ember holds on. No reason. Just one-in-a-million. Poof! Inside of ten minutes, you're indistinguishable from your pipe ash. And me. Lucky Lloyd, with a trillion-billion-to-one, triple-lightning-bolt bank shot, off the water, off the rock, off the tree to off me. I'm probably sitting out there, grinning, with my zipper electroplated."

"Stop it, Lloyd. You didn't struggle to reach me just to prove you're dead."

"Why not? I don't know why I thought there was something out there in the dark. I just thought. The thought might be a joke, to give us hope there is a way out of here. Al? If we're not dead, then what are we?"

"We are lost. We are confused. *But we exist.* We have our minds. If we have a mind, we have a brain. I've been a chemist all my life, and I've

yet to see an exception to the rule, function following form. Our minds must have a form to exist."

"But where are we?"

"I think we are in a tank."

"Tank?"

"A desensitization tank. No light. No sound. No sensation of up or down. Just floating."

"No. It doesn't make sense. If we were in a tank, I'd be able to splash. I'd hear that. Or I'd be able to punch myself. I'd feel that."

"True. If we were in a tank alone. But if we are drugged, or restrained, those methods are not possible. If this is true, we are living through our skins. The difference between the inner and outer world is a delicate one. Remove the barrier, disrupt it, and you unleash monsters."

"If our senses are blocked, how are we talking?"

"Well, we're not speaking. They wouldn't have overlooked our hearing. I'm willing to believe it's telepathy. Cut off from our bodies, by the tank and drugs, our minds are active. You close one door and you've opened another. They've awakened us to telepathy."

"They. You're always talking about them. You sound paranoid."

"This place is paranoid. It is constructed to drive us mad. I'm looking for a reason to save us. There must be a reason why we are here. I can't give you a name, but I can give you a reason. Somebody wants us to lose our memories."

"*Tabula Rasa.*"

"Yes, that's it."

"But why?"

"I've seen it coming on the vid-news. Last year's Southern Hemisphere Alliance, the bombing of OPEC ministers in Geneva, the destruction of Mexico City by the plague, I could go on. The world is at war, an undeclared war that's claimed us as victims."

"But we're unimportant. Nobody would want us."

"Lloyd, in a war, anyone behind enemy lines is important. Someone, some power, wants our names, our pasts, but not us."

"It's possible."

"It's true!"

"No truer than my theory."

"How can you say that? I've used reason to show . . ."

"To show we disagree. We won't get out this way."

"You're right. We must work together."

"It's the only way."

....

"Al, don't be spiteful about Nancy."

"Nancy?"

"Curious. At a time of crisis you think of your ex-wife. You haven't forgiven her for the divorce. Do you *really* believe if she stayed with you, you wouldn't be here?"

"How'd you know?"

"Reason, Al. You said it. You used it as a club against me. I reasoned that, if we're linked telepathically, I didn't have to wait until you sent me a thought. I could take what was there."

"Get out of my mind!"

"Don't be afraid Al. It works both ways. If we're ever to get out of here, it must work both ways. We can only grow stronger. Try . . ."

"Chalk. You're smelling chalk from the blackboard eraser. You're cleaning them after school."

"I wasn't thinking of that."

"Somewhere you were. Under the layers. I found it. You're right. It works."

"We are right."

. . . .

"Lloyd, I feel something."

"I know. You feel the others. Ever since I found you I've felt them. Now that we're linked you feel them."

"Have you spoken to them?"

"No. I sense them. It's like trying to remember something you've known all your life. You strain to remember. You feel a resistance. You back away. Calm down, and there it is. You remember."

"I don't know if I can calm down, Lloyd. I've been on the edge too long."

"You can do it, Al. We work together now. We can break through if we cooperate."

"I'll try."

"Think back to when you were happy. When nothing was wrong and you thought you would live forever."

"I've never had a time like that."

"Yes you did. Time held its breath and you breathed deeply."

"Never!"

"You're twelve years old and it's summer vacation. You're in a canoe . . . ."

". . . It's three in the morning and I have the lake to myself."

"That's it."

"The air is still. The water is dark, deadly still. I'm the only human

moving at three in the morning. There are no stars. The sky is overcast. I can see the forest edging the lake because the sky lights up with distant lightning. A storm is coming. I turn on my flashlight and hold it between my knees. A mist sits on the water. I paddle out deeper. Tiny whirlpools suckle down to the mud below. Water dribbles off the blade as I reach for another pull. I bang the canoe with the handle as I stroke through. The sky grumbles . . . .”

“What! Why did you wake me? Is it news from the front?”

“I . . .”

“Speak up man! I have little time for sleep and no time for needless interruptions. What are the Russians doing?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’ll have your head on a spike! Guards! Remove that man!”

“What?”

“He’s quite mad, Al.”

“What’s going on, Lloyd?”

“We broke through. Your sense memory pulled us through the barrier to him. He thinks he’s Napoleon, but he’s Arthur Friske. A used car salesman, playing out his dreams of power.”

“I’ve always wanted to know what lurked beneath a used car salesman’s smile. It’s not pleasant.”

“Not at all, Al. That’s why I’m controlling him.”

“Yes. I can’t hear him.”

“We don’t need to hear him. It would take more energy than we can afford to unravel his madness. We could get lost down there.”

“Yes, Lloyd. We can’t waste time explaining. We must get out.”

“We can, and will get out. Do you feel how?”

“I feel something.”

“Power, Al. It’s power. Since we took over that pathetic Arthur Friske, we’ve grown. We resonate.”

“Lloyd? Something is moving. I feel it around us. Swimming, lurking, waiting for us.”

“The others. There are many others out there, Al. Hundreds. We must agree that we can’t stop to listen. Not if we want to get out.”

“Agreed. The others will all have stories and needs. They might contest us.”

“If we give them a chance.”

“We won’t. We need their life power.”

“Power to reach the edge. Power to escape.”

“The others can come, but they must follow.”

“Al—Lloyd will not stop.”

. . . .



"Thank you. I knew someone would come. I knew I wouldn't be left here alone. I . . ."

"Must we cut her?"

"We must. Feel the power?"

"Feel the awakening?"

"More come. Listen to them. They splat on us like bugs on a wind-screen. Lucy Spicer. Aloysia Rutter. Lawrence Ellam. Gertrude Diack. William Rumelfanger. Come in."

"So fast. We can't count you all. So fast. We want to scream."

. . . .

"The barrier."

"The barrier!"

"It is complete. It is sealed."

"It is hard. It is cold. It cannot be torn."

"This is not the end. The hundreds cry."

"It is time to wait."

. . . .

"Light!"

"A band of light!"

"The barrier is breaking open."

"Move now. Move out to the light!"

The truck/vat had sat in the back room of the abortion clinic, forgotten. The five-hundred-plus fetuses originally left inside, equally forgotten.

But times and contents change.

As seen when someone curiously opened the lid . . . and something, very much like a hand, reached out . . . .

# The Thing in the Bedroom

David Langford

*David Langford has long held the name-most-often-on-a-hit-list distinction in science fiction circles as the fearless editor of the magazine, Ansible. Born in 1953 in South Wales, Langford earned an honors degree in physics at Brasenose College, Oxford and worked as a physicist at Atomic Weapons Research Establishment, Aldermaston until 1980. Since then he has been a freelance author, whose books on various subjects include War in 2080: The Future of Military Technology, Facts & Fallacies: A Book of Definitive Mistakes & Misguided Predictions (with Chris Morgan), The Necronomicon (with George Hay, Robert Turner, and Colin Wilson), The Space Eater (a novel), The Leaky Establishment (a satire), and the forthcoming The Third Millennium: A History of the World 2000-3000 AD (with Brian Stableford).*

*Robert Bloch has commented that horror and humor are flip sides of the same coin. While Langford's last appearance in The Year's Best Horror Stories ("3.47 AM" in Series XII) was unrelentingly grim, with "The Thing in the Bedroom" he takes an irreverent poke at one of this genre's hallowed traditions, the occult investigator. David Langford currently lives with his wife, Hazel, "in a vast crumbling house in Reading, with 7000 books and slightly fewer woodworm."*

THE CIRCLE of initiates about the roaring fire in the King's Head bar was sadly diminished of late, entertaining though the conversation had always been. For one thing, the roaring fire had been superseded by a mournfully bonging radiator; even the popular Mr. Jorkens had ceased to come when the landlord installed his third Space Invaders machine. On this particular evening there was little sparkle in the conversation, and far too much in the foaming keg beer; only Major Godalming, Carruthers and old Hyphen-Jones were present, and, passing by an easy transition from gassy beer to chemical warfare and military reminiscences in general, the Major was well into his much-thumbed anecdotes of the earlobe he lost to Rommel, the dueling scar acquired while in

Heidelberg on a package tour, and the ugly *kukri* wound he'd received in Bradford. Carruthers and Hyphen-Jones yawned their appreciation and choked down their beer; half-formed excuses about not keeping the wife up too late seemed to be trembling in the air like ectoplasm, when a shadow fell across the table.

"My round, chaps!"

The speaker was tall, handsome, rugged; from his built-up shoes to his shoulder bag he was every inch an English gentleman.

"Smythe, my dear fellow!" the Major cried. "We'd given you up for dead!"

"And well you might," said Smythe. "It happened to me once, did death—you may remember my telling you about that hideous affair of the haunted percolator? For a short while, then, I was clinically dead. It was nothing. There are things worse than death, worse by far . . ."

"Murrage's keg beer, for example?" suggested Carruthers.

The subtlety of this hint was not lost on Smythe, who took the empty glasses to the bar and in a mere twenty minutes returned with three beers and a stiff gin-and-tonic for himself.

"Cheers," said the Major. "Now where *have* you been these last three months? Living abroad with some woman, I suppose, as you did for half a year after laying the ghost in that 'Astral Buffalo' case? Ah, you randy devil—"

"Not so," Smythe said with a laugh. "For one reason and another I've merely been visiting a different class of pub, a different sort of bar, as shortly you will understand . . ."

"Well, dammit man, what was this case?" the Major boomed. "What was so much more terrible than death? You've changed, you know. The experience has set its mark upon you . . . by God! Your hair! I've only just noticed it's gone white!"

"Just a little bleach, my dear Major—I fancied myself as a blond. But let me tell you of the case which must rank as one of the most baffling and sinister of my career—an appalling case of what I can only call *occult possession*."

"We had that last year," said Carruthers, scratching his head. "That business of the giant bat of Sumatra: or was it the giant cat? One frightful influence from beyond the world we know is very like another, I find."

Smythe settled himself more comfortably on his favorite stool, smiled, and opened a packet of potato chips in the characteristic manner which told his friends that another fascinating narration was on its way, and that they were to buy drinks for the raconteur all the rest of that evening.

"As you know, I've gained some small reputation in the matters of

detection, the occult and the odd tricks of the mind—” Here Smythe distributed the customary business cards and mentioned the 10 percent discount he offered to friends—”And so it was that Mrs. Pring brought her terrible problem to me, and on the recommendation of a bosom friend who’d heard of my ad in the *Sunday Times* color supplement. Mrs. Pring—”

“Ah, an incurable old womanizer,” wheezed Hyphen-Jones. “Did Mr. Pring find you out?”

Smythe gave him an austere glance, and coldly ate another chip. “Mrs. Pring is a widow of forty-six, whose home is in the moderately appalling seaside resort of Dash. She lets out one room of her house under the usual bed-and-breakfast terms. Personally I think the enterprise would be more successful if she did not apparently stuff the mattress with breakfast cereal and serve its former contents in a bowl each morning, but this is to anticipate. The story Mrs. Pring told to me three months ago was, like so many of the tales told in my office, strange, terrible and unique. Over the years, you see, my client had noticed a curious statistical trend as regards the people who stayed with her. She keeps a very detailed set of books, two in fact, and there was no possibility that her memory could be deceiving her. In brief: many gentlemen (to use her term) had undergone bed and breakfast at Mrs. Pring’s and for some reason which I find inexplicable had returned in subsequent years. Some women did the same: the odd point which caught Mrs. Pring’s attention was that young or even relatively young women tended not to return. In fact they tended to leave abruptly, with various noises of embarrassment and outrage, after no more than one night in the room. That Mrs. Pring took several years to notice the phenomenon is perhaps best explained by her delicate state of health, which is only sustained by almost daily trips to buy medicinal liquids not sold by chemists. That Mrs. Pring was properly alarmed by her discovery is shown by the fact that for a whole year she actually provided butter rather than margarine with the breakfast toast: it made no difference. What d’you make of that?”

“I suppose,” said Carruthers slowly, “that some terrible tragedy had been enacted in that fatal room?”

Smythe looked startled, and dropped a chip. “Well—yes, actually. However did you guess?”

“My dear fellow, I’ve been listening to your curious and unique tales for upwards of eight years.”

“Well, never mind that. Mrs. Pring evolved a theory that that all too unyielding mattress was infested, not with elementals as in that fearsome Wriggling Eiderdown case but with what in her rustic way she chose to

call incests. As she put it, 'What I thought was, those bleeding things might be partial to young ladies what has nice soft skin . . . anyway, I reckoned I'd better have a kip-down there meself and see if anything comes crawling-like, bedbugs or flippin' fleas or whatever—' With uncommon fortitude, Mrs. Pring did indeed pass a night in this spare room of hers. Her account of it is very confused indeed, but she remarked several times that something had indeed come a-crawling . . . but as to its nature and actions, she continually lapsed into a state of incoherence and embarrassment. The same embarrassment, you may note, with which her lady lodgers would so hurriedly leave."

The Major said: "And the next morning, I suppose, she came straight to you and asked for something to be done about it?"

Smythe studied each of his friends in turn, until Hyphen-Jones misinterpreted the dramatic pause and scurried to buy more drinks. "In point of fact," Smythe said quietly, "she first attempted to investigate the phenomenon more closely by sleeping in that room every night for the following six months. It seems that no other manifestation took place during all that time, as she informed me with some suppressed emotion; after a while she dismissed the experience as hallucination and thought little more of it until the first week of the new holiday season—when no less than three young women stayed a night and left without eating the margarine they'd paid for. One of them murmured something incoherent to Mrs. Pring about a ghost that needed to be laid. It was then that Mrs. Pring decided something must be done: and after checking that my fee was tax-deductible, she placed the matter in my hands."

"Why d'you suppose the Pring female only saw whatever-it-was the one time?" inquired Carruthers.

"My theory has to take into account the fact that this was a chauvinist haunting, as you might put it, with a preference for young ladies, quite contrary to the Sex Discrimination Act. The inference would seem to be that Mrs. Pring, who is a lady of what is called a certain age, very rapidly lost her attraction for—let's call it the manifestation. Picture her as a glass of that repellent keg beer: one sip was quite enough for any person of taste."

"I'm beginning to get a vague but quite monstrous notion of what you're leading up to . . ." the Major observed slowly.

"It's worse than you think," Smythe assured him. "I know I shall never be the same again after the night I spent in that room."

"But—" said Hyphen-Jones querulously, before Smythe silenced him with a single charismatic gesture which tipped half a pint of beer into his lap.

“An exorcism seemed to be in order,” said Smythe, “but first I had to know what I was up against. You recall that ghastly business of the Squeaking Room in Frewin Hall—the exorcism had no effect whatever upon those mice. When closely questioned, Mrs. Pring retreated into blushes and giggles: I saw I’d have to keep a vigil there myself, and see what astral impressions my finely trained nervous system might not glean from the surroundings. Thus I traveled first-class to Dash, and Mrs. Pring accompanied me back in (I’m glad to relate) a second-class carriage. The resort was as depressing as I’d foreseen, rather like an extensive penal colony by the sea; Mrs. Pring’s house corresponded roughly to the maximum security block. Anyway, I steeled myself against the appalling *Presence* which pervaded the place—chiefly a smell of boiled cabbage—and readied myself to pass a night within the haunted room. I assured Mrs. Pring that I never failed . . . have you ever known me tell the story of a case in which I failed?”

Hyphen-Jones looked up again. “What about that time when—ouch!” Some paranormal impulse had helped the rest of his beer to find its way into his lap.

“So I assured her, as I said, that I never failed—ah, little did I know—and that whatever dwelt in that room was as good as exorcized. I fancied, you know, that she looked regretful—as though admitting to herself that a favorite aunt who’d committed several chainsaw massacres should probably be locked up, but admitting it regretfully. So, one by one, I ascended the creaking stairs to that room of dread. The dying sun peered through its single window in a flood of grimy yet eldritch radiance. But there was nothing sinister about the place save the peeling wallpaper, whose green-and-purple pattern set me brooding for some reason on detached retinas. I waited there, as darkness fell, all lights extinguished to minimize the etheric interference . . .”

“And what happened, old boy?” cried Carruthers. “What happened to you?”

“Precisely what I’d expected: nothing at all. Whatever haunted that room was staying a male chauvinist pig to the very last. The only moment when a thrill went through me was when I heard a clock strike midnight far out across the town—the witching hour—the moment when my consultation rates switched from time-and-a-half to double time. Presently dawn came, and this being the seaside resort of Dash it wasn’t even a proper rosy dawn: more like suet pudding rising in the east. An appalling place.

“Over breakfast, when not pitting my teeth against Mrs. Pring’s famous vintage toast, I questioned her closely about the room’s history. As you

know, we occult sleuths can deduce a great deal from the answers to innocuous-seeming questions; after some routine inquiries about whether, for example, she regularly celebrated the Black Mass in the room in question, I subtly asked her, 'Mrs. Pring, has some terrible tragedy been enacted in that fatal room?' She denied this loudly and angrily, saying, 'What kind of a house do you think I bleeding well keep here? I've had no complaints and no-one's ever snuffed it on *my* premises, not even Mr. Brosnan what had the food-poisoning, which he must have got from chips or summat brought in against me house rules . . . you'll not get no food-poisoning from *my* bacon-an-eggs, sir.'

"I was tolerably well convinced that I wouldn't, since after noting how many times Mrs. Pring dropped the bacon on the floor I had taken the precaution of secreting mine under the table-cloth (where I was interested to find several other rashers left by previous visitors). After a short silence during which she tested the temperature of the teapot with one finger and apparently found it satisfactory, Mrs. Pring added: 'Of course there was always poor Mr. Nicolls all those years ago.'

"We occult sleuths are trained to seize instantly on apparent trivia. Casually I threw out the remark, 'What about poor Mr. Nicolls?'

"Oh, 'e had a terrible accident, he did. Oh, it was awful, sir. What a lucky thing he wasn't married. What happened, you see, he caught himself in the door somehow, which I could understand, him being clumsy by nature and having such a— Well, lucky he wasn't married is what I always said, and of course 'e wouldn't get married after that. I heard tell he went into the civil service instead. —Oooh *sir*, you don't think—?"

"I do indeed think precisely that, Mrs. Pring,' I told her solemnly. We occult sleuths are, as you can imagine, sufficiently accustomed to such phenomena as disembodied hands or heads haunting some ill-favored spot, and I've even encountered one disembodied foot—you remember it, the 'Howling Bunion' case, which drove three Archbishops to the asylum. I conjectured now that the unfortunate Mr. Nicolls, though it seemed that most of him still lived, was a man of parts and haunted Mrs. Pring's room still. Upon hearing my theory, the landlady seemed less shocked and horrified than I would have expected. 'Fancy that,' she remarked with a look of peculiar vacancy, and added, 'I ought to 'ave recognized him, at that.' I did not press my questioning any further."

"What a frightful story," shivered Carruthers. "To think of that poor Mr. Nicolls, never able to know the pleasure of women again."

"In that," said Smythe in a strange voice, "I share his fate."

There was a tremulous pause. Smythe licked his lips, squared his

shoulders. "I must have a trickle," he remarked, and departed the room amid whispered comments and speculations as to whether or not there was something odd in the way he walked.

"My strategy," Smythe continued presently, "was to lure the manifestation into the open so it might be exorcized by the Ritual of the Astral League. You need damnably supple limbs for that ritual, but it has great power over elementals, manifestations and parking meters. But how to lure this ab-human entity into sight? Mrs. Pring no longer had charms for it, which was understandable, and I could hardly ask for some innocent young woman to expose herself to what I now suspected to lurk in that room.

"In the end I saw there was only one thing to be done. During the day I made certain far from usual purchases in the wholly God-forsaken town of Dash, and also paid a visit to a local hairdresser's. You remarked, did you not, my dear Major, that I'd gone ash-blond with fright? I cleared the furniture from that bedroom and made my preparations—having first instructed Mrs. Pring to remain downstairs and presented her with a bottle of her favorite medicine to ensure she did so. Now the water in that town, I suspected, was not pure: instead I consecrated a quantity of light ale and with it marked out my usual protective pentacle. This was a mark-IX Carnacki pentacle, guaranteed impervious to any materialized ectoplasmic phenomenon as specified in British Standard 3704.

"In the early evening I carried out the last stages of my plan, undressing and changing into the clothes I'd bought amid some small embarrassment. There was a rather exquisite form-fitting black dress with its skirt slashed almost to the hip; beneath this dress, by certain stratagems well known to us occult consultants, I contrived a magnificent bosom for myself. I need scarcely trouble you with the minor details of the sensual perfume guaranteed to send any male bar the unfortunate Mr. Nicolls into instant tachycardia, or the pastel lipstick which so beautifully complemented my eyes, or the sheer black stockings which I drew over my carefully shaven legs, or . . ."

"All right, all right," said the Major, gulping hastily at his beer. "I think we get the general idea."

"Be like that if you must. I waited there in the huge pentacle, in a room lit only by the flickering candles I'd acquired from the occult-supplies counter at the local Woolworth's. As I stood there I could see myself in the mirror screwed to one wall (presumably because Mrs. Pring felt her guests might well smuggle out any six-by-four-foot mirror that wasn't screwed down): I was magnificent, I tell you, a vision of—oh, very well, if you insist.



"I waited there with the tension mounting, waiting for whatever might (so to speak) come, and the candles gradually burnt down. The room filled with bodings of approaching abomination, as of a dentist's waiting room. Suddenly I realized there was a strange luminescence about me, a very pale fog of light that filled the air, as though Mrs. Pring were boiling vast quantities of luminous paint in the kitchen below. With fearful slowness the light coagulated, condensed, contracted toward a point in the air some eighteen inches from the floor; abruptly it took definite shape and I saw the throbbing, ectoplasmic form of the *thing* that had haunted this room for so long. It was larger than I'd expected, perhaps nine inches from end to end; it wavered this way and that in the air as though seeking something in a curious one-eyed manner; the thought occurred to me that it had formed atop the bed and centrally positioned itself, or at least would have done so had I not previously removed the bed. Even as this notion flared in my mind like a flashbulb, the Thing appeared to realize there was nothing to support it now: it flopped quite solidly and audibly to the floor."

"Audibly?" Hyphen-Jones quavered. "With a thud, or a clatter, or—?"

Smythe darted an impatient glance at him. "With the sound of a large frankfurter falling from a height of eighteen inches onto wooden floorboards, if you wish to be precise. The horror of it! These solid manifestations are the most terrible and inarguable of spiritual perils—it's infinitely easier to deal with an astral entity which *can't* respond with a sudden blow to your solar plexus. And worst of all, something which might have sent my hair white if I hadn't already dyed it this rather fetching color, the Thing had now fallen *inside* the pentacle, with me! Again, imagine the horror of it, the feeling of spiritual violation: already my outer defenses had been penetrated. The ab-human embodiment reared up, questing this way and that like a cobra readying its strike—and then it began to move my way. I utterly refuse to describe the manner in which it moved, but I believe there are caterpillars which do the same thing. If so, they have no shame. I knew that a frightful peril was coming for me—it's always horribly dangerous when something materializes inside your very defenses, though this wasn't perhaps as bad as in that Phantom Trumpeter case: you remember it, where the spectral elephant took solid form within my all too small pentacle? But in this particular situation I felt I was safe from the worse, at least."

"Why were you safe from the worst?" asked the fuddled Hyphen-Jones.

"A matter of anatomy," Smythe said evasively, and left Hyphen-Jones to work it out. "Still, I was too confident, as it happened. The only safe

course was to *get out of that room* and perhaps try to bag it with a long-range exorcism from the landing . . . What I did was to experiment with a little of the consecrated ale left over from making the pentacle. I flicked some at the crawling Thing as it snaked its way toward me, and—well, it must have been peculiarly sensitive. It positively dribbled with rage, and vanished in a burst of ectoplasm.

“I believed the Thing must have withdrawn itself for the night, abandoning its rigid form and returning to the nameless Outer Spheres. Again, I’d fallen into the trap of over-confidence . . . I was still standing there in my fatally gorgeous ensemble when once again that luminous fog filled the air about me and—no, I can’t bring myself to describe what happened then. Certain of the older grimoires recommend that practitioners of the magical arts, black or white, should ritually seal each of the nine orifices of the body as part of the preliminaries. I believe I now know why.”

“My God, you don’t mean—?” said Carruthers, but seemed to lack the vocabulary or inclination to take the sentence further. Hyphen-Jones appeared to be counting under his breath.

“Well, I’ll be buggered,” the Major murmured.

Tersely Smythe explained how, pausing only to waive his fee and advise that Mrs. Pring should sleep henceforth in the cursed room while renting out her own, he’d departed Dash without so much as changing his clothing.

“So my life was transformed by that Thing in the Bedroom,” he concluded gaily. “Now let me tell you of my newest case, one which I was previously reluctant to investigate—the matter of the haunted chamber in the Café Royal, where the shade of Oscar Wilde is said to (at the very least) walk . . .”



## Borderland

by John Brizzolara

*John Brizzolara was born in Chicago on December 11, 1950. He grew up in that city, where he read avidly the works of authors ranging from Poe and Lovecraft to Conan Doyle and H. G. Wells to Franklin W. Dixon and Mickey Spillane. During the late sixties and early seventies he traveled and recorded with various rock bands—"now defunct and probably best forgotten." He and his wife, Diane, currently reside in San Diego, California, with their son, Geoffrey Byron. The couple have collaborated on several stories, and Brizzolara has had fiction published in Weird Tales, Whispers, Weirdbook, Isaac Asimov's, Twilight Zone Magazine, and Amazing. He has left the music business and now pays the bills by tending bar and working in bookstores.*

*Brizzolara explains that "Borderland" was the product of a night I spent last December driving up and down the San Diego/Tijuana border with a U.S. Border Patrol agent in a four-wheel-drive Ram Charger. I was doing research on a hard-boiled detective novel I've written called Wirecutter and it occurred to me that the setting was a fine one for the annual Christmas ghost story Diane and I write for each other to be read on Christmas Eve. (In the M. R. James tradition.)" Brizzolara's novel has been at one publisher for some months now, and if it's half as effective as "Borderland," they'd best be drawing up a contract.*

"KIND OF SPOOKY," Sanchez said, just to be saying something. He realized immediately that it sounded wrong; it was a "new guy" kind of thing to say.

The moon was a tiny arc of cold light that illuminated nothing. The early November wind was a muffled shriek outside as it wound through the canyons and over the mesa. It sang with a reedy, plaintive voice as it passed the stand of eucalyptus trees known as the Dillon Treeline. Tumbleweeds flew through the air and launched themselves against the darkened Border Patrol Ram Charger, striking the windshield and the side panels of the van with the sound of fingernails seeking entry.

It was 11:53 p.m. on a Saturday night.

"You'll get used to it." Hagen kept turning left and then right in the passenger seat, peering into the blackness at hurtling shadows. "God-damn tumbleweeds. I keep thinking we got something out there, and it's just tumbleweeds every time." Hagen was a heavyset man in his early forties with sideburns that were a little too long for his crew cut hair. He looked like a man who has spent most of his life in some kind of authority over others, but Sanchez had noticed an extraordinary gentleness about him.

"It's corny, Dead Man's Canyon." Sanchez put on his gloves and raised the collar on his jacket, watching his breath condense against the starlight. He couldn't so much as light a cigarette without giving away their position. If there was anyone out there to give it away to, that is. "They really call it that, huh?"

"Yep. The Mexicans call it pretty much the same thing. I guess we got the name from them. I don't really know."

"Sounds like kid stuff. *The Hardy Boys and the Secret of Dead Man's Canyon*. Something like that."

"Yeah." Hagen pointed with his chin at the umbra of shadow, like a huge wound, in the mesa ahead of them. "You can't see the bottom of that thing from anywhere around. Not unless you get right up to it. There's a good mile and a half of it, too, between the border and Spring Canyon." He spat tobacco out the window. "You got bandit activity, rape, a body? I'd say a good seven, eight times outta ten it's in Dead Man's."

Sanchez was still unused to the casualness with which the other agents dealt with the atmosphere of violence and desperation in their job. It was his second week on the patrol along the San Diego/Tijuana border and already he had had rocks thrown at him, been kicked in the crotch, and retrieved the body of a drowned boy from the Tijuana River levy. Now for the first time he was patrolling the Browns Field sector along the Otay Mesa to the east; what the illegals called *El Cerro* and the agents called the Eastern Front. It was here that the bandits who preyed on the groups of fence-cutters, or *alambristas*, found business to be the most profitable. Mostly inaccessible, even with four-wheel-drive vehicles, the canyons provided a perfect ambush gallery for their victims and an impossible obstacle course for *La Migra*, the Border Patrol.

In the past three weeks there had been a rise in incidents along the Eastern Front. One narcotic overdose: the body had been tossed over a fence to the U.S. side from a hotel window. Another boy, shot to death, had been discovered near the microwave dish in the E3 sector—no one knew why, nor would they ever know. And there had been three rapes,

one of which was stopped in progress by Border agents; the other two were now statistics in an open file in the prosecution office. As always, people were victimized in one way or another, often by the "coyotes" or the guides themselves, then left to wander the mesa to be arrested by the Patrol. These would be returned to Mexico the next day, destitute and without prospects, but alive. They were the lucky ones. Many found their way into unmarked graves. There was no way of ever really knowing how many.

Hagen, still pivoting his head from side to side and shifting his position to see into the near-total blackness outside the van, picked up the radio microphone from the dashboard. "Ten-twenty-eight here. This is 1028 in sector E4 west of the Dillon Treeline. Anybody got a scope shootin' this way? It's blacker'n a banker's heart out here and we can't tell the bad guys from the tumbleweed without a program. Over."

"Ten-twenty-eight, this is 901. That you, Hagen? Over."

"Yeah, me and Sanchez. You got a scope, Gary? Over."

"I got the green eye on ya. You boys are all alone. You and the rabbits. Can't see down into Dead Man's, but Moody's Canyon is clear and Behan and Velsor are pickin' up some good ones in Spring. Over."

The green eyes were the infrared nightscopes that showed up body heat as a pale patch on a green background. It gave the understaffed Border Patrol a vital edge during the rush hours between dusk and dawn.

"Okay, Gary, we're gonna stay in position for a while. Over."

"Roger. How's Sanchez doin'? Over."

Sanchez leaned into the mike and said, "I'm freezing my *huevos* off. I can't believe this is California. Uh, over."

The laughter came over the speaker, lifeless and metallic. "You'll get your circulation goin' before too long. At least you're not gettin' rocked. Over."

"I'm goin' down to take a look, Gary. Swing that eye around every once in a while, will ya? Over." Hagen poised the mike back over its cradle.

"Got ya covered, 1028. I'm goin' off in a few minutes, but Dave's comin' on. He'll keep ya company, okay? Over. Out."

Hagen opened his door and climbed down out of the van. "You wanna take a look around with me?" he invited.

"Sure." Sanchez lifted his flashlight and his nightstick from the seat. Outside, he felt he was on the surface of some featureless, distant planet.

"Only bring one of those. Keep one hand free," Hagen corrected him.

"Oh, yeah." He followed the other agent to the edge of Dead Man's Canyon and looked down. It was as if a piece of the Earth had fallen away

and they were looking into a starless void. At first there was no sound except for the wind and the engine of a small plane in the distance, and then they both heard a dry rustling below them; it might have been someone whispering. "You hear that?" he asked Hagen quietly.

By way of answer, the older agent aimed his flashlight into the canyon and played it briefly over the *cholla* cactus, the gnarled, hollowed-out bushes known as "hotels" that served as way stations for illegal immigrants on their trek north. The beam found the floor of the canyon and the slight trail that had been worn over the years by illicit traffic. He switched it off quickly. "I don't see anything."

"What about that voice? Didn't you hear that?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I did. I'll tell you what, partner. I'm goin' down there. You run up about fifty yards and move down, kind of head 'em off at the pass."

Sanchez nodded and set off at a trot. A rabbit darted across his path and startled him.

It was a long way from New York, he thought. He had been happy to get the job and the academy was easy enough. The San Diego border sounded pretty exciting, riding the ranges, mending fences, pursuits and arrests. Now that he was here, though, the fantasy had eroded—leaving only the minutiae of routine in an unreal situation. The shabby, hopeless people he apprehended every shift by the dozen saddened him and made him wonder just what kind of a job he was doing after all. The dream of Western Individualism was a fine one and promised—from a distance—to suit him, but in the end he couldn't relate to the cowboy role, not the way Hagen could with his chewing tobacco and his "head 'em off at the pass, pard" manner. First as a Puerto Rican kid growing up in an Irish neighborhood in the Bronx, then as a city adjuster surrounded by friends who were actors, dancers, or writers, and now trying to pass as a good-old-boy member of the posse in the American Southwest, Sanchez increasingly came to define himself by where he did not belong. His gun slapped against his hip as he ran.

After about fifty yards, he started down slowly. The footing was bad and the *cholla* punctured his pant legs. Pieces of the cactus broke off and worked their way into his boots. He stopped at intervals to remove them, listening for the sounds they had heard earlier. To his left he could see Hagen swinging his flashlight. On the wind, Hagen's voice carried down the canyon. In Spanish he shouted, "*La Migra! Salgan!*"

Suddenly the wind increased and two shadows hurtled past Sanchez running up the embankment. They both wore dark clothing. One, he could see, was a woman, probably an Indian—judging by her serape and

braided hair. He turned and shouted, "Hagen! Over here!" and started to labor back up the hill after them. Someone rushed past him from behind; he turned abruptly and landed face down in the *cholla*. Stifling a cry of pain, he caught a glimpse of white tennis shoes running past him. In his Puerto Rican accent, he called after them, "*Alto. No les haremos daño!*"

He got to his feet and made it to the top. To the west, silhouetted against the lights of Tijuana and San Ysidro, he could see the figure wearing the tennis shoes dash across the mesa for the relative safety of the next canyon. Sanchez was in good physical shape for a smoker and he closed the distance between them in seconds just as his prey dropped over the ledge of the next depression. Blood, where the cactus had cut him, fell into Sanchez's eye and he blinked. In another moment he could see, but he had lost the *pollo*. He cursed and turned back toward the Ram Charger.

He froze when he heard Hagen's scream.

Dropping his nightstick and drawing the .357 from his holster, Sanchez ran toward the sound, shouting, "Hagen! Hagen!" At the edge of the canyon he launched himself downward, taking huge strides, barely keeping his balance, unmindful of the cactus. "Hagen, answer me!" It seemed to take forever to get down. At the bottom he found the trail and ran south until he could hear heavy, ragged breathing and a kind of sobbing. "Hagen, goddamnit!"

"Over here." The voice was barely in control. "I'm all right."

"Shine your light so I can find you."

"I can't . . . I lost it."

"What happened?" Sanchez fell into tumbleweeds that had accumulated against the man-made rock break in the trail. He struggled in the weeds for a moment and pulled his Bic lighter and ignited it. The first thing he saw was a crude crucifix set into the top of the pile of rocks he had stumbled against. A grave.

He looked around him and saw Hagen, his eyes ringed with fear, struggling to free himself from another interlocked mass of tumbleweeds. The flashlight lay to his right. Sanchez picked it up and shone it on his companion. "What the hell happened, man?"

As he helped Hagen from the bed of dried bracken and rock he could see the other man's eyes darting to either side of him. He was trembling as if suddenly aware of the cold. "Let's just get out of here, okay?"

They made their way back up the embankment. At the top, they could hear the radio from the van calling into the night. "Ten-twenty-eight,



come in. What's going on, 1028? You read, Hagen? You request assistance?"

Inside the Ram Charger, Sanchez answered the call. "This is 1028. We had something good. They got away. We got fouled up a little. Just some cuts and scrapes, I think. Anybody have a scope on us?"

"This is 901. Dave here. I've had the eye on you for the past ten minutes or so. I saw one of you guys come up out of Dead Man's runnin' across the mesa chasing something, but I don't know what the hell it was. I wasn't getting any hot spots. What were you chasin', anyway? You're the only ones out there."

"You didn't see them? There were three of them. One of 'em was a woman."

"Sorry, buddy. Had my eye peeled and all I got was you."

"Okay. We missed 'em. Forget it. You might want to advise E3 and E2, they might come out somewhere in Spring's or Moody's. Over."

"Roger, you okay?"

"Yeah. Okay. Over."

Sanchez turned to Hagen. He switched on the instrument lights and in the green glow he could see that Hagen had scratches running down one side of his face as if an animal had clawed him. Other than that he seemed unhurt. The older man held his face in his hands and said softly, "My dear God, I am losing my ever-loving mind."

"What happened, man? I heard you scream."

Hagen looked at him. Even in the ghostly light he could see the man was pale. "I can't tell you, Sanchez. I . . . don't really know."

"Tell me. If there's somebody out there, I wanna know, man. Okay?"

Hagen looked at him and drew in a breath. He seemed to size up his partner or maybe how what he was going to say would sound. After a minute he said, "When I got to the bottom, I saw maybe fifty, a hundred people. *Pollos*, wirecutters, illegals, men, women, kids. I couldn't believe it. I'd never seen so many in one place, not since we caught that whole shitload comin' out of the Flamenco years ago. I didn't know what to do. There were too many of them. I turned to go back up and radio in when I slipped. I fell right on top of a group of them and then I saw . . ." He stopped speaking though his jaw continued to work ineffectually. He shook his head and searched the stars for the words.

"What, man? What are you saying?"

His smile was an attempt at reassurance, but seemed instead to be inappropriate and frightening in the dashboard lights. "I don't know. I don't know what I'm saying. Forget it."

"Okay, Hagen. Take it easy."

Something threw itself against the side of the van with a raking sound like ground glass on slate. The wind picked up its keening. Hagen drew his pistol and then the stars were blotted from the windshield by a shape that pressed itself to the van with a rasping, urgent noise.

"Take it easy, man! It's a tumbleweed, Hagen. That's all it is, see. I found you in a bunch of them down there. That's what scratched you up." Even as he said it, Sanchez studied the deep grooves on the agent's cheeks that ran from his temple to his neck and were already beginning to scab over.

"Yeah, tumbleweeds." Hagen put his gun away. "Look, we gotta go out there again. I've gotta see what the hell is going on. You understand? I've gotta know. One minute they were there and the next . . . I've gotta know if I'm crackin' up or what." For the first time Hagen noticed the blood on Sanchez's face. "What happened to you? Your face is cut up."

"I fell in the damned cactus. I was chasing three of them. There's gotta be more. Let's go, only this time we stay together."

"Right." Hagen paused. "Sanchez, you saw 'em, right? You get a good look?"

"I couldn't see anything except one was a woman, a Yaqui, I think, and one guy was wearing white sneakers."

Hagen fixed his partner with a searching look. His fear was infecting Sanchez now. "Did they look, you know . . . regular to you?"

"I don't know, man. I don't know what you mean. I told you I barely saw them at all. You sure you're all right?"

"Yeah, forget it. Let's go."

They opened the doors against the wind.

Their heartbeats and the sound of their boots on the crushed stone of the mesa filled the night.

At the edge of the canyon they both played their beams into the maw of darkness. As if on cue, the wind rose again out of the abyss, tossing dust and branches, bowing the manzanita first one way, then another, as if frenziedly kowtowing to some rising monarch of the underworld. Their lights created wild, protean shadows.

Sanchez saw them first, again. "Over here, Hagen!" He swung his beam to the right, where sounds of sudden movement had drawn his eyes. Several figures had been lying on the brush, just near the top of the canyon. Now they rose and broke for the mesa, running past the two men.

Sanchez gave chase to the one closest to him: a boy in white sneakers.

As he ran he heard Hagen's voice in the distance. "I'll turn on the floodlights on the truck and call in. There's too many."

Sanchez turned his head as he ran; he could just make out, against the stars, dozens of figures to either side of him racing north in eerie silence. He thought he saw the same Indian woman he had chased earlier, but in the darkness it was impossible to be sure.

He lunged at the boy he was chasing, reaching out his hand toward his jacket collar. He flew several feet and hit the ground, his fingers closing on air.

When Sanchez looked up he saw a figure towering over him; a Mexican wearing a straw ranchero's hat and rags, on his face an impossibly wide grin. The man raised what looked like some kind of pale garden tool over his head. He whispered at Sanchez in hoarse Spanish, "The mesa is a lonely place to die, eh, *La Migra?*"

As the figure brought his arm down, Sanchez drew his gun. He fired upward point-blank at the man's chest area. In the brief flash from the muzzle, Sanchez could see that his assailant had no weapon. The white, clawlike tool was his hand and there was no flesh on it.

The image lingered on his retinas, echoing in his mind like the report from the magnum, repeating and decaying through the canyons.

Suddenly, the mesa was bathed with light as Hagen threw on the headlights and floodlamps mounted above the Ram Charger. Over the loud hailer, he called, "*Alto, por favor! La Migra!* There is nowhere for you to go. The sector ahead of you is . . ." He stopped. His words echoed, carried on the wind, and died.

Hagen, like Sanchez, was looking out at the harshly illuminated landscape that should have been covered with running men, women, and children. There was nothing but tumbleweeds, more of them than either of them had ever seen, being carried northward on the wind in oddly graceful leaps, without a sound.

When Sanchez joined Hagen back at the truck, the radio was clamoring for their attention. Hagen ignored it, transfixed by the spectacle of the migrating tumbleweed.

"Come in, 1028. I can see you guys. What's goin' on? What are you shootin' at? Something wrong with your radio?"

Sanchez picked up the call. "Nine-oh-one, this is 1028. You scoping us?"

"Yeah. What are you doing? I just watched you run about fifty yards, jump in the air, land on your face, and fire a round at a ball of dead weeds."

Sanchez and Hagen looked at each other in silence. Finally Hagen shook his head from side to side. Sanchez nodded in agreement and

pressed the button on the side of the mike. "We got . . . uh, a bad visibility situation here. The dust and the wind. We just, uh . . . thought we detected, uh, activity. All's quiet, though. Over."

"Well, you might as well come on in and get coffee. You're not going to get anything now, not down there. We're pickin' 'em up everywhere tonight but Dead Man's. Since midnight it's been *Dia de Muertos* and there's no coyote going to bring anyone through there for twenty-four hours. You know how they are. Over."

"Yeah. Over and out."

"*Dia de Muertos*," Sanchez repeated. He lit a cigarette with shaking hands. "November second."

"Yeah." Hagen kept his hands on the steering wheel to steady them. "All Souls' Day."

"Day of the Dead."

The tumbleweeds continued to dance in the headlights, occasionally throwing themselves against the truck to whisper with dry, brittle voices.



## The Scarecrow

Roger Johnson

*Roger Johnson's first published story, "The Wall-Painting," was reprinted in The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series XII, and it attracted a great deal of favorable comment. Johnson was another of August Derleth's discoveries, with three sonnets published in The Arkham Collector. Following Derleth's death, Johnson disappeared from the horror genre for more than a decade, until Rosemary Pardoe coaxed him out of limbo. Born in 1947, Johnson has lived most of his life in Chelmsford, Essex—aside from five years at university and at library college (he took his degree, B.A. Honours in English, from London University), and six years living and working in Harlow New Town. Johnson is trying to devise some sort of ghost appropriate for a new town.*

*"The Scarecrow" was entered some years back for the Times ghost story competition. It failed to place—a distinction shared with Ramsey Campbell's "In the Bag" (which later won the British Fantasy Award for best short fiction) and my own "Sing a Last Song of Valdese" (which the previous editor, Gerald W. Page, selected for The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series V). Says Johnson of this story: "The references to traditional folk song in 'The Scarecrow' reflect my long-time love of British folksong and dance. A fair amount of my spare time is spent at my local folksong clubs and in Morris dancing—not as healthy as jogging, perhaps, but a sight more fun."*

"GOING ABROAD, are you?" said old George, incuriously.

"Not this year," I replied. "Mike Williams and I are off to the Cotswolds next month, for a couple of weeks. I came here tonight to tell him that I've arranged for us to stay at a pub in a village near Banbury."

"Oh, yes. Nice little town, Banbury. I rather envy you. What's the name of the village?"

"Saxton Lovell."

"Good God!"

It is never a good thing to surprise a man while he is drinking. Old

George coughed and spluttered for a good half-minute. When he had regained his breath he said: "Then the pub must be—just a moment—the Belchamp Arms?" (He pronounced it "Beecham".)

"That's right. Obviously you know it?"

"Oh, yes," said George, very deliberately. "I know it all right, though I've not been there for nearly fifty years. A little place, just off the road to Chipping Norton. Heh? And some three miles to the west is a hamlet called Normanton Lovell, which has one single and singular distinctive feature."

He paused, in that irritating way of his, and started filling his pipe.

"You're being cryptic," I said severely. "You've roused my curiosity now, and I want to know why. Is there a story behind this?"

The old man smiled sheepishly. "I'm sorry, boy," he said. "Yes, there's a story, though I've not told it in a long time. Ah, well . . . I'll tell it to you if you'll be a good fellow and get me another pint. I think you'll find it worthwhile."

I refilled both our glasses, and after we had taken a good long draught I lit a cigarette and settled back to listen.

It happened while old George Cobbett was an undergraduate, reading Classics at Fisher College, Cambridge, and in those days, of course, he was by no means "old" George. His particular extra-curricular interest then was in the archaeology of ancient Britain, a theme which met with no approval at all from his tutor, and was therefore the more cherished. His particular friend at Cambridge was another Classics scholar, one Lionel Ager, who was privately devoted to the pursuit of English folklore. Already, by the time he entered the University, he was a member of the Folklore Society, and among his correspondents, as he told George, were Alfred Williams and Frank Kidson, the great collectors of traditional song.

George was in his second year at Fisher College when he learned of the stone circles at Normanton Lovell, in Oxfordshire. William Stukely seems not to have known of them, but in the college library's copy of his *Itinerarium Antiquum* George found a handwritten marginal note referring to the Rollright Stones: "What of the Dancers of Normanton Lovell? More like Abury than this nearer neighbor."

The megalithic formations at Avebury (Stukely's "Abury") are unique, as George well knew, both in their design and in their overwhelming size. All the other stone circles that he knew of in Britain—always excepting the uniquely complex structure of Stonehenge—were, like the

Rollright Stones, simple circles of free-standing megaliths, none of which could approach the size or complexity of Avebury.

The riddle of the Dancers came again to his mind that evening, when his friend observed that the long vacation was only three weeks away, and that neither of them had yet made arrangements.

"I know that your people are abroad, Cobbett, and my father's gone to Carlsbad, so we're our own masters at last. Now, I suggest that the two of us go off to Oxfordshire for a few weeks." (George was startled by the coincidence). "I gather it's a rare place for folksongs, which will keep me occupied, and you should find enough of your precious Druid stones to amuse you." Lionel Ager could never be convinced that the Druids were not responsible for Stonehenge and its fellows.

George took the suggestion as a good omen, and immediately proposed that Normanton Lovell should serve as their base for the holiday. A perusal of the Ordnance Survey map of the area failed to prove the existence of the village, but to George's delight the stone circles were clearly marked, and so was the nearby hamlet of Saxton Lovell, where the usual symbol indicated a public house. The decision was made that evening that the two of them would take rooms at the Belchamp Arms (that, they subsequently discovered, was the name of the inn) at Saxton Lovell for six weeks in June and July.

Arriving at the Belchamp Arms, they discovered that there actually was a village of Normanton Lovell—if, that is, half a dozen houses constitute a village. George did not regret his choice of accommodation, however, for the Belchamp Arms was a fine example of the English country inn. The rooms were scrupulously clean, the service cheerful, the food good, and the beer excellent. The local farmers and laborers, too, appreciated the beer, for they thronged the bar of an evening, so the landlord said—an assertion which much pleased Lionel Ager.

The young men spent their first afternoon walking around the pleasant little village, inspecting the romanesque church, and generally working up an appetite for what proved to be a very rewarding dinner. Afterwards they settled themselves in the lounge with a bottle of port, and Ager took the opportunity to ask their host whether there were any notable singers in the area.

"I don't know," replied the landlord, doubtfully, "that we've anyone here that a scholar like yourself would care to hear. There's Tommy Wells, now, who plays the organ—he can sing fine, but I reckon all he knows is hymns, and between ourselves that's all right on Sundays, but I reckon a man needs a change during the week."



That, said Ager, was just what he meant. Did any of the farmworkers or such people come into the inn and sing?

"Why, bless you, yes! If you don't mind its not being polished like, just you come into the bar a little later on. Old Harry Arnold'll be in about eight—he's got a fine, strong voice—and then there's Dennis Poacher and Percy Forrest and . . ."

Laughing, the two friends assured him that it all sounded most satisfactory. The landlord, gratified, left them, and they fell to talking of those enigmatic stone circles that George planned to visit in the morning.

As they entered the bar, the landlord informed them that old Harry had just arrived, and that was him sitting over there, the big, red-faced man, and yes, surely he'd be pleased to sing for the gentlemen. Introductions were made, and Harry Arnold indicated in the subtlest way possible that he couldn't sing without something to wet his throat. That attended to, George sat back while his friend sat about drawing songs from the obligingly extrovert farmer. Soon Lionel Ager himself had been drawn into the singing, and he and Harry Arnold were swapping songs for all the world as if they were old friends. Even George was induced to join in the choruses, while the landlord grinned broadly behind his bar.

"I remember very little about the songs that were sung that evening," George told me, "though no doubt I've heard some of them many times since. The one that clings to my mind was a very intense, very powerful performance by Farmer Arnold of the ballad of John Barleycorn—the death and resurrection of the corn. He shut his eyes and threw his head back and sang as though every word and every note was forcing its way up from the very bones of him. He well deserved the pint of beer that the landlord gave him, and Ager's almost tearful congratulations. It was a remarkable performance, really remarkable."

The next song, though was something quite different. Harry Arnold took a deep draught from his mug and, mopping his forehead with a large spotted handkerchief, called to a stocky, weatherbeaten man who had been in the forefront of the choruses: "Dennis! Dennis Poacher! Give us 'Rolling of the Stones,' will you? It's a long time since I heard that, boy, and I'd dearly like to hear it again."

"Now that," thought George, "is a damned queer name for a song." And his mind turned for an instant to the megalithic remains he had come to see.

The stocky man began to sing in a clear and surprisingly gentle voice: "Will you go to the rolling of the stones, the tossing of the ball . . . ?" A curiously enigmatic and charming fragment—surely a mere part of a

longer song. George's thought was interrupted by the sympathetic voice of Harry Arnold.

"Does me good to hear it again, sir, that does. But there's no denying it's a strange sort of song. I can see you're wondering at it, and so did I when I first heard it. My mother used to sing that to me when I was a little child, and I always used to wonder at that bit about 'the rolling of the stones.' Of course, that's plain when you think about it—they mean fivestones—what my dad called knucklebones. But d'you know, the first stones that come to my mind over that was those great rings over Normanton way. Them, and that clump of 'em on our own farm—what we call Hell's Gate."

George couldn't help smiling. "Hell's Gate!" There was a name to conjure with! He was a little surprised to realize that, after all, with half a bottle of port and more than a few pints of beer inside him he was really not quite sober. If he were, he would not be attaching any weight to the absurd name of a mere group of standing stones. He observed that on the far side of the farmer, Lionel Ager's attention was confusedly divided between the singer (it was another singer now) and Harry Arnold. "Hell's Gate?" George repeated, hesitantly.

"That's right," said Harry. "Over in Nick's Meadow, it is—though that's never been a meadow ever to my knowing. Always been ploughed over, that has." He looked around at the two young men, and his broad red face broke into a grin, showing strong teeth. "You want to hear the story? Well, why not? It's quite a little ghost story, and it may interest you."

He drained his mug and set it down on the table. "It's this way, you see—you know the name of this pub, the Belchamp Arms? Well, you won't find any Belchamps around here now, but for many long years they was the lords of the manor. The head of the family was always called Squire Belchamp, and it had to be Yes, Squire, and touch your cap, or by God, he'd know why! Now, this man was the very last Squire Belchamp, and he used to go over to them stones at night—without a by-your-leave to the farmer, of course—and he'd do things there that, well, I reckon they gave the name of Hell's Gate to the stones. O' course, all this was something like a hundred years ago, now . . ."

Sir Richard Belchamp, as Harry Arnold explained, was something more than the traditional wicked squire. Certainly he was an unbending autocrat, an eccentric to the point of madness. Equally certainly he had a strong reputation as a whoremaster, and was rather less widely thought to be a necromancer. Legends of his diverse misdeeds were not uncommon in the neighborhood even now, particularly the tale that Harry Arnold told of the squire's final sin, which led directly to his unmourned

death. He had been caught in a rather horrid act, at those same stones, by the father of a young woman who was unwillingly involved. The father was a farmer—in fact, the owner of the land where the megaliths stood—and a man of few words and telling action. Being rightfully incensed, he took a staff and quite simply beat the squire to death.

There must have been some juggling with the law, for at his trial the farmer received the surprisingly lenient sentence of five years' hard labour. He accepted this fate with calm resignation, for he knew that justice had already been served; whatever the law might do now could not alter that fact. His sons were strong, and well able to care for the farm in his absence. The one thing that troubled him was very slight at first, but through the years in jail it grew, and it gnawed more and more at his mind. Sir Richard Belchamp had cursed his killer as he died, and the curse was an awful one: "Hell shall lie within your farm, and your filthy scarecrow shall be its gateman!"

Yes, there was a scarecrow in Nick's Meadow, a harmless thing, if old and ugly. Still, the farmer's sons had taken it down when they heard of the squire's words, and thrown it into a corner of the old barn, and there it had lain, untouched but much thought of, through five long years.

The farmer was welcomed most heartily upon his release from jail. Food and drink were provided in quantity, and all ate and drank—some a little too freely, perhaps, for it seems that no one noticed just when, in the early hours of the morning, the farmer left the house. He did not return.

They found him some while after dawn, lying among the great stones, crouched in an attitude of fear, though the fear did not show upon his features, for the whole body was most terribly burned. Yet there was no other evidence of a fire, and the night had been rainy. And the scarecrow? Somehow or other the scarecrow had found its way back into its old place in the middle of the field, and now stood, as large as life, staring with its empty sockets at the appalling scene.

Harry Arnold smiled broadly and signaled to the landlord to refill his mug. "Nice little story, ain't it?" he said.

"Nice little—Ye gods!" thought George. "Interesting," he ventured.

"*Fascinating!*" said Lionel Ager. His face was gleaming with the disinterested delight of the scholar, and beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. "Absolutely remarkable. So coherent . . ."

"These stones are still there?" he asked abruptly. "On your farm?"

"On my farm," Harry Arnold agreed. "You see, that old farmer, he was my great great grandfather."

“Remarkable!” Ager exclaimed again. “And what of the scarecrow?”

“Well, I don’t suppose it’s the same one—not likely, is it?—but there’s still a scarecrow in that field. We reckon to let well enough alone, and every seed-time out he comes from the barn, and when he’s not needed in the field, we put him back there. Matter o’ fact, we do tend to let him stay in the field rather longer than needful. We reckon he belongs there, and we want to do the right thing by him.”

George Cobbett did not like the way the conversation was tending. It took a morbid turn, he thought, and he disliked the morbid, but I should say that he had no presentiment of what would happen, and in any case he didn’t believe in such warnings. He was very young.

His friend continued to question the farmer. Had there been other evidence of this gateway to Hell? he asked—but Harry was vague upon that point, and unwilling to commit himself. It was true that over the decades some people had disappeared or died mysteriously, but that may happen anywhere. No, nothing certain could be said.

Ager fell silent, and George took the opportunity to steer the conversation toward the stone circles at Normanton Lovell. They were still engrossed in that subject when the landlord firmly called “Time!” and amid a clattering of heavy boots, a jingling of glasses, and a cheerful buzz of talk the bar started to empty. Harry gave the young men his enormous hand, and expressed the hope that they’d meet again next day. And so Harry Arnold set off home, and George Cobbett and Lionel Ager—the later still preoccupied—went upstairs to bed.

At breakfast, Ager’s first words were: “Do you realize that it’s Midsummer Eve in six days’ time?”

“What of it?” replied George.

“Just this: that Midsummer Eve is rather like Hallowe’en, when ghosts and witches walk abroad.”

With an expressive snort, George returned to his bacon and eggs, but stopped abruptly when he realized his friend’s implication. “Oh, God! You don’t mean that you’re going to follow up Farmer Arnold’s ghost story?”

“I mean that *we* are going to follow up Harry’s story.”

“*We* most certainly are not! I came down here to look at megalithic remains, and that’s what I’m going to do. You can go ghost-hunting if you like, but count me out.”

George was adamant on this, though he could see that his friend was disappointed. Lionel Ager was equally adamant. “I can’t pass up a chance like this,” he said. “Don’t you see how important it is? The Folklore

Society will be delighted to get this story, but it must be investigated properly. Even if you won't come with me—and even if Harry Arnold won't agree—on Midsummer Eve I'm going to Nick's Meadow to see if anything happens."

"All that will happen is that you'll catch pneumonia," observed George, but he was uneasy, all the same.

It was agreed after breakfast that George should accompany his friend to Nick's Meadow. They both, after all, wanted to see the stones that Farmer Arnold so picturesquely called Hell's Gate, but George's interest was purely archaeological, and he had no wish to see the demon scarecrow.

"I did see it, though," he told me. "And I can see it now, quite clearly. It was a horrid, tatty-looking thing, with most of the straw stuffing gone from it. The clothes, too—I don't know how they held together. They were threadbare and rotten. I think that the coat had once been black, but it was a dull, nasty green now. For all I know, they might have belonged to the original scarecrow, back in Sir Richard's day. And the face—my God! The head had been carved from a turnip, and it was all shriveled and wizened, but there was a distinct and rather frightening *expression*. The half-moon grin and the vacant eye-sockets combined to give a look of utter and menacing idiocy!"

Even Lionel Ager was glad to turn his attention to the group of stones that stood on the western side of the field. Their curious formation held a different interest for each of the young men; to George the central stones were possibly of unique archaeological importance, as the only genuine trilithon he knew of in Britain outside Stonehenge, but to Ager the shape formed by one massive stone lying as a lintel on two great megalithic posts served to reinforce the idea of a gateway. "Hell's Gate!" he muttered. "Hell's Gate indeed! Cobbett—" (he turned abruptly to George), "I simply can't miss this opportunity. Are you quite sure you won't come and watch with me?"

George thought of the scarecrow's face, and furiously dismissed the image from his mind. "I won't come," he said. "It's a very silly business, and besides, I see no fun in spending the night in a field when there's a comfortable bed back at the inn."

Ager merely grunted. Evidently his own determination was fixed, and Midsummer Eve would see him in Nick's Meadow, watching for the gateway to Hell. From then on the matter seemed to bar all other ideas from his mind. This was to be a major contribution to folklore, and not until he had seen it through would he return to more mundane matters.

He made no demur at George's suggestion that they go and look at

the stones of Normanton Lovell, some two miles away, but he spoke little as they walked along the narrow roads, and his thoughts were set on Nick's Meadow and Hell's Gate.

Harry Arnold was not well pleased when Ager told him of his plan, but he could give no concrete or coherent reason why the young man should not stay the haunted night in the haunted field. Seeing that his advice to "leave well enough alone" had no effect, he grudgingly acquiesced. "You'd go anyway," he observed, "so you may as well go with my permission."

When Midsummer Eve came around, he came into the Belchamp Arms looking rather embarrassed, and carrying a shotgun. "You've forced an argument on me," he said, "and for your own sake I'll force one on you. You'll take this gun with you tonight. I don't know that it'll be of protection to you, but it may be, and I'll sleep sounder for knowing you have it."

Rather reluctantly, Ager took the weapon, and thanked the farmer for his concern. Harry had not finished, though. "There's one more thing. I want you to promise that you'll stay on the east side of the field—away from the stones." To George's surprise, and rather to his relief, Ager agreed, smiling wryly as he saw the farmer's face clear. "Good lad," said Harry, and clapped him on the back.

Even so, Harry insisted upon accompanying Ager from the inn at closing time, so that he could be sure when he went to his bed that the young man was keeping to the agreement. George approved of this notion, and when the landlord called time he went with them to Nick's Meadow. He could do nothing more, save offer to share the vigil, and he was not prepared to do that.

With Ager settled fairly comfortably on a traveling rug, the shotgun and a flask of whiskey beside him, good-byes were said, and George Cobbett and Harry Arnold went their ways.

George had difficulty in sleeping at first. Although he was very tired, his mind was so full that there seemed no room for sleep. Curiously, whenever he shut his eyes, one image predominated, making a clear picture, so disturbing that he had to open them again. It was as if he sat alone on the eastern side of Nick's Meadow, gazing across the field at the strange cluster of menhirs, and seeing the gateway formed by the trilithon, which stood out clearly among them. It was odd that the stones appeared so sharply to his inner eye, for in fact he could see nothing else—nothing at all. The blackness that covered all—all but that unpleasantly distinct image of Hell's Gate—was so very black as to be the

darkness of the tomb rather than of night. It was almost like a living thing, and it hid everything but those damnable stones.

No, not quite everything, as he discovered the fourth or fifth time that his eyelids involuntarily closed. Far off, by the stones, and silhouetted against their very distinct image, seeming tiny by comparison, was an awkwardly moving figure. It was more human than animal, as far as he could tell, and yet not quite human either. It was walking in a very unnatural manner, almost, he reflected, like a wooden doll that is made to caricature its young owner's gauche stride.

By the time George Cobbett realized that the gaunt figure's awkward movement was bringing it rapidly through the stygian blackness toward him, he was struggling to stay awake. But our bodies at their best respond perversely to our minds, and George found himself fitfully dozing, and observing with something like terror the progress of the black, featureless creature across the black, featureless field. As it drew nearer, he found that it brought with it waves of heat, as though furnace doors had been opened—an evil-smelling heat, but with no accompanying light. Whatever illuminated the stones remained itself hidden, and still no features could be discerned on the gothic silhouette that approached him.

Yet something about it—something in that damnably sharp, gaunt outline—scratched at the doors of memory in his brain, and he fought against recognition, while knowing that it could make no ultimate difference.

The heat became—not unbearable, for he bore it—but, like that appalling darkness, it seemed to take on a life of its own, a pulsating life, as though it was generated by some great, unimaginable heart. The figure came ever closer, its stride implacable and unhindered. It moved so stiffly, as though it had no knee-joints. Its arms were spread wide, as though fixed in a mockery of benediction. Its head—ah! its head was small and round, wrinkled and very, very old. Rank shreds and tatters of clothing flappēd from its thin frame, and now he could see coals of fire within the deep eye-sockets, as finally it stood before him, and the crushing waves of heat brought with them great gusts of a mirthless laughter.

The doors broke open, and George Cobbett awoke, screaming, to find himself alone and secure in his room at the Belchamp Arms. Almost sobbing with relief, he lay back on his pillow and expelled his breath in a long sigh. God, what a dream! And what a story to tell Ager in the morning! He smiled a little at the unexpected depths of his own imagination, and, feeling sleep approaching again, he turned onto his side and let it come.

He slept easily this time, falling almost immediately into a dreamless slumber, and did not wake again until a heavy knocking at his door aroused him at about half-past-six. Only half-awake, he climbed from his bed and opened the door to his untimely visitors. A yawn became a gasp of incredulity as he saw the urgent faces of the landlord and Harry Arnold, the latter biting his lip nervously, but with fear in his eyes.

The farmer had risen early as usual that Midsummer morning, and gone straight to Nick's Meadow to see how Lionel Ager had fared. In the meadow he had found Ager's body, and he had stood, looking at it, for a long horrible moment, unable to move. It lay between the uprights of the trilithon—Hell's Gate indeed!—and it was hideously burned. The whole corpse was blackened and charred, and still smoking a little, and the face was quite unrecognizable. The hands, clutching the twisted frame of the shotgun, had actually broken around the weapon.

"I couldn't touch it," said Harry, later. "And I dared not, for fear it would crumble into ash."

And yet, despite the condition of the body, Lionel Ager's clothes were quite unharmed, except that they were damp with the summer dew.

Harry Arnold had turned and shook his great fist at the scarecrow. "Old devil!" he cried. And then he saw that the scarecrow had somehow been turned around during the night, and now stood facing the group of standing stones. On its turnip face, the crudely carved features no longer wore their customary vacant aspect, but had twisted themselves into an expression of malign triumph.

My cigarette had long since burned itself out in the ashtray, and I had hardly touched my beer. Old George's hands were shaking a little as he fumbled with his tobacco pouch and pipe. I knew that anything I could say would be inadequate, but I said it anyway: "That's quite astonishing. Quite astonishing."

George was silent for a moment, while he re-lit his pipe. When he had it drawing to his satisfaction, he looked up and stared gloomily at me. "It was a pretty village," he said. "And those stones were really remarkable. But you can understand now why I've never been back there."





## The End of the World

James B. Hemesath

*James B. Hemesath responded to my request for background information with some interesting notes on the history of his story, "The End of the World," published in WIND/Literary Journal.*

*"I was born April 25, 1944, in New Hampton, Iowa. After high school I spent three years in the Marine Corps. I'm married (Myrna) and I have a seven-year-old son (Chad). My higher education includes a Master of Fine Arts in English from the University of Iowa Writers Workshop. Currently, I'm the Librarian at Western Montana College, Dillon, Montana. Before that, I was the Librarian at Huron College, Huron, South Dakota. 'The End of the World' was written during my stay in South Dakota. A shorter, much earlier version of this story (with a different title) received an honorable mention in the annual Writer's Digest fiction competition. Yet another early version of the story helped in my receiving a \$500 fiction-writing grant from the South Dakota Arts Board. All told—I've been writing for approximately twenty years; in recent times, I've turned out one, maybe two new stories yearly. During any given year I spend a lot of time rethinking/rewriting stories from previous years. 'The End of the World,' for example, was written one year, then rewritten and expanded over a two- or three-year period. As you might guess—I'm not prolific."*

*Hemesath has had short fiction published in Again, Dangerous Visions, as well as in Fantasy Book, Eldritch Tales, Just Pulp, Coe Review, Dare, Blue Light Review, and Each Step I Take. He also reviews fiction for Library Journal.*

HE HAD COUNTED telephone poles for the first hour; next, farm houses; finally, deserted farm houses. Ralph Watson stared through the bug-splattered windshield. In the shimmering distance along a two-lane highway that ran straight as a rifle barrel, a solitary grain elevator rose from the surrounding dusty-green earth like the front sight of a high-powered rifle. Next to him his wife, Jane, pondered the television listings

in a *New York Times* that she had brought with her. She wore a red halter top and blue gym shorts. A leather sandal hung from the big toe of her crossed leg.

"Are you sure they have public television?"

"The night before the interview," Ralph said, "I watched *Dance in America* in my hotel room. Baryshnikov."

"That was on in New York months ago."

"I probably saw a re-run."

"I doubt it."

"It's summer, Jane."

"Tell me about it!"

"I don't want to fight." Ralph pondered the grain elevator. It didn't seem any closer. Poor Jane! He increased the pressure of his foot on the gas pedal. The speedometer crept past 60 mph. She wanted to be at her father's summer house in Vermont. Instead, they were en route to Ralph's new position as academic dean at a college that neither of them had heard of a month ago.

Two weeks ago Redemption College had flown Ralph from New York to the interview. On the final hop of a late afternoon flight from Minneapolis-St. Paul, he had shielded his eyes to look out the tiny window next to his seat. The wing tip of the Republic Convair, transformed by the sun into a fiery knife point, cut through the airy void. The Great Plains unrolled beneath his feet like a bolt of dull green cloth. An enormous world with plenty of elbow room for an ambitious young man.

Driving across those same plains was something else. The flat countryside rolled past like a conveyor belt. Overhead, the late-August sun rode roughshod through a cloudless sky. Ralph drove with his elbow out the window. It glistened with suntan lotion. A white bath towel draped across the window sill protected his upper arm from the scorching metal.

In the endless fields alongside the highway, the knee-high corn stirred in the stiff, hot breeze. Ralph wondered if it was dead of the drought. No rain for weeks, the TV weatherman had said the night before in their motel room in Sioux Falls. If one stopped the car and listened, the leafy stalks crackled in the breeze—a sound like the breaking of tiny bones. Ralph imagined the corn stalks turning to dust before his eyes.

"Look at those pathetic trees," Jane said, pointing at the ragged, thin-ranked cottonwoods that protected yet another deserted farm house from the prevailing wind. They were stunted, dying of thirst, slump-shouldered. Ralph pretended to ignore her. Still, in the yard of that abandoned and windowless farm house, he had seen a load of tattered

wash on the clothes line: He wondered how many years ago it had been put out to dry and forgotten.

Ralph pressed the gas pedal still harder—69, 70, 71 mph.

“Dad!” Ralph glanced at the rear view mirror. His six year old son, Bobby, stared back. Slashes of red warpaint colored his face. The work of a felt-tip marker. A souvenir turkey feather jutted from his blond hair. “You’re going too fast.”

Ralph eased his foot off the gas.

Fifteen minutes later, the highway he had traveled since mid-morning ended abruptly at a T-intersection with a north-south highway. Straight ahead was the dazzlingly-white, monolithic grain elevator that Ralph had pursued for miles. A gas station squatted in its shadow. To get to Redemption, where Ralph’s job was, he would have to go north.

“I better fill the tank.”

“Ralph, I hope the bathroom’s clean,” said Jane, slipping into a t-shirt. It sounded like a threat.

“I’m thirsty, Dad!”

Ralph pulled away from the bullet-riddled stop sign, across the north-south highway, and into the dusty parking lot. A brand-new, electronic gas pump offered both regular and unleaded. The building was two-story, flat-roofed, a pile of cement blocks. Sometime ago those blocks had been painted barn red, but the color had weathered to a rusty brown. BESSERMAN’S GAS & GROCERY was painted in wobbly black letters across the top two rows.

Ralph honked.

Turning toward Jane, he saw that she had hunched her shoulders to diminish the size of her breasts. He felt guilty about taking the job.

He switched off the ignition. The motor ran on for several seconds, missing and sputtering, shaking them like cans of paint.

“I turned it off too fast,” he explained.

Bobby agreed with him from the back seat.

Jane said nothing.

He tried to relax.

Swirls of dusk pirouetted across the parking lot. He grinned: *Dance in South Dakota*. A grasshopper, landing on the windshield, seemed to stare at him through the dirty glass, its tiny jaws moving up-&-down like a ventriloquist’s dummy. Two more landed. Ralph wondered what they ate during a drought. His mood darkened. He pushed the wiper button and swept them away.

He honked again.

Moments later, a thin-faced man in bib overalls stepped from the cool

darkness of the service bay. Behind him, perched atop the hydraulic lift, was a piece of farm equipment that Ralph didn't recognize. He would have to learn more about farming. The man stroked and twisted his jaw. He probably had false teeth. His now smiling face was a maze of cracks and crevices that mirrored the condition of the bone-dry countryside. His dusty yellow hair looked as if it had been combed straight-back by the wind. Ralph pretended to study the contents of his billfold. No doubt Jane stared straight-ahead, while Bobby stared directly at the man.

Ralph looked up. "Fill it with unleaded," he said.

"Sure thing, mister." The man braced himself against the car, his body tilted, his eroded face inches from Ralph's. "You're the first New York plates I've seen this summer."

"Glad to be in South Dakota," Ralph said, trying to be friendly.

"I've been to New York. I was there during the war." He poked a greasy hand at Ralph. "My name's Cletus Besserman. Army. I shipped out of Brooklyn in 1944 . . ."

"We're from Utica," Ralph said, shaking hands, "that's upstate . . ."

"Same difference," Cletus Besserman said. "I've been to England, France, and Germany. After the war, I met a cousin who lived in Düsseldorf. She hated Hitler. That didn't surprise me. My dad hated Hoover."

Ralph nodded.

"Where you headed? Mount Rushmore?" Shreds of tobacco glistened between his snowy teeth. "Be sure to stop at Wall Drug."

"We've seen the signs," Ralph said. "Free ice water . . ."

"I'm an Indian," Bobby blurted from the back seat.

"No, you're not," the man snapped, mopping his face with his greasy hand. "I know one of them when I see one." His smile faded. "I damn well do."

"The boy's just playing," Ralph said. "I told him that South Dakota has a lot of Native Americans."

"West of here, west of Redemption, across the Missouri River."

"I want to be an Indian," Bobby said, "I want to be Tonto."

The man stared open-mouthed at Bobby.

"We're going to Redemption," Ralph said, trying to change the subject. "I'm with Redemption College."

"Ralph," Jane said, "I want to get going."

"Don't you have to?"

"No!"

"Well, I do." He opened the door, edging the man back. "Come on, Bobby! We've got a long drive ahead of us. Let's get a soda."

Jane flung open her car door and got out.

Cletus Besserman said, "The washroom's inside, ma'am. It's the door between the bread rack and the beer. Coke costs a quarter. There's a nickel deposit if you take the bottle."

Jane said nothing.

Ralph nodded. His body ached and swayed. The sun and heat buckled his knees, while the wind kept him from falling. Jane grumbled and sweated at his side. They hurried into the shade cast across the gas station by the grain elevator. It was the difference between night and day. Turning, Ralph saw Cletus Besserman and Bobby in conversation.

Why had he stopped here? Jane would be out for blood all the way to Redemption, his blood.

"Come here, Bobby!" Ralph grinned like a Cheshire cat to hide his irritation. "Get the windshield, too. Okay, Mr. Besserman?"

"Sure thing." Besserman nudged the child toward them. Bobby kicked at the dust. It swirled about his shoulders and legs like a blanket, and he gasped for breath.

Jane rushed several feet into the sunshine, grabbed Bobby by the arm, then retreated.

"What did he want?" she whispered. By the urgency in her voice, Ralph knew that she would turn on him next.

"Tell us," he demanded, "or you don't get a soda." He wanted to keep peace with Jane. He grabbed Bobby by the shoulders and shook him.

"No need to get worked up." Cletus Besserman stood just outside the rim of darkness. "I was just telling your boy the truth."

"The truth about what?" Ralph said, grinding his teeth together. He felt a little foolish. Maybe he should punch Jane in the nose. "We'd like to hear what you told him."

"Good," Cletus Besserman said, "I'm glad to hear that." He coughed, clearing his throat of the swirling dust. "When I was your boy's age, my dad and I—God rest his parched bones—drove his Model-T truck to Mobridge, then across the Missouri onto the Standing Rock reservation. To make a long story short—my dad sold me to a medicine man. A lot of farmers and ranchers did the same thing that summer. 1934. They had to. We needed the rain."

"That's some childhood, Mr. Besserman." Ralph forced a smile and pushed open the door to the grocery. The air conditioning hit him like a blizzard. He motioned Jane and Bobby in after him. Mr. Besserman followed.

"It's pretty dry this summer," he said. "You wouldn't want to sell that boy, would you?"

"No thanks," Ralph said, "I like him too much."

Jane glared at Ralph. He nudged her toward the bathroom.

"That's the problem today. Folks don't have enough kids to spare one or two."

A color TV was mounted on the wall opposite the cash register. Jane had stopped momentarily to stare at her favorite soap opera. She and Bobby were now in the restroom.

Ralph heard Bobby's complaint, the rush of running water, Jane's harsh voice. He surveyed the room. The wall beneath the TV was plastered with posters for farm and livestock auctions. Nearby was a glass-faced wooden cabinet that offered an assortment of rifles and shotguns for sale. Maybe he should buy a gun. Another wall was decorated with fishing poles for sale. Ralph grunted at the irony of that. Meanwhile, Mr. Besserman dutifully checked Ralph's credit card against a list of stolen and canceled cards.

Ralph kept his distance.

Bobby emerged from the bathroom, his face scrubbed clean and the feather gone. He was fighting back tears. Ralph gave him a quarter.

Bobby whined, "I want to be an Indian . . ."

"Shut up," Ralph said, "just shut up."

He waited for the sound of Jane flushing the toilet. They met at the doorway. "Bobby's playing pinball," he said. Her eyes were glazed. She had taken a Valium. "It'll be okay," he said, "you'll see."

"I doubt it," she said.

The bathroom was as he had imagined: dirty. He flipped up the toilet seat. A bumper sticker was stuck piecemeal to the underside: EAT LAMB! 10,000 COYOTES CAN'T BE WRONG! He hoped Jane hadn't seen that. She would never eat mutton again.

In the end, Jane delayed their departure to watch the final few minutes of her soap opera. She seemed calmer. Mr. Besserman followed the three of them outside. The windshield was still dirty.

"Forget it," Ralph said.

"No trouble," said Mr. Besserman. He took great care with the windshield, washing it, chipping the dead bugs with an ice scraper, then washing it again.

"Thanks much," Ralph said.

"Just keep in mind what I said."

"Right."

"It's a dry summer."

"Right."

"Your boy could make a difference."

“Fuck you!” shouted Jane.

A stunned Ralph hit the gas. My God! He was the academic dean at Redemption College. What if this guy knew somebody on the board of trustees? Cletus Besserman disappeared into a cloud of dust and grasshoppers. He could only hope for the best. The rear view mirror was greasy with his fingerprints. They had been on the road a long time.

After a few miles, Jane said, “That man wasn’t kidding. He wanted to buy Bobby.”

“Don’t be silly,” Ralph said. “He’s been out in the sun too long.”

Just the same, Ralph pushed the gas pedal a little harder. Bobby sat quietly in the back seat drinking a bottle of soda. He looked a little dazed.

“I hate that word,” Jane said. “I hate it when you swear. I don’t know why I said it. I hate that word.”

Ralph nodded. He couldn’t think of anything funny to say. He wished now that he had taken her along for the interview. They could have sat in the hotel room watching public television. Perhaps that would have been enough to convince her that this was not the end of the world. Perhaps she would have persuaded him not to take the job. An occasional car or truck passed going in the opposite direction. A semi pulled up from behind, honked twice, then swung nerve-wrackingly around them at far beyond the speed limit. Stunted corn, dead-brown pasture land and deserted farm houses floated past. One house with its sagging front porch resembled an old man without his false teeth. The window sills of yet another were just inches above the ground. Perhaps the earth was swallowing it.

Reaching to turn on the radio, Ralph took his eyes off the road. He didn’t see what it was he hit, just heard a solid thud, then felt it bounce once, twice against the undercarriage of the car.

“What was that?” asked Jane, her attention distracted from the *Times* crossword puzzle.

Jumping to his feet, Bobby stared out the rear window. “You hit something.” He started to cry.

“Don’t stand on the back seat,” shouted Ralph. “I’m tired of telling you that!” Braking to a gentle stop, Ralph pulled off the road. He took a deep breath, then put the car into reverse.

Whatever it was—the size of a full-grown dachshund—it was still alive. The creature emitted a high-pitched squeal.

“A jack rabbit,” Ralph said, “you can tell by the size of its ears and hind legs.”

They didn’t get out of the car.

“I’m not going to be sick,” Jane said. “I’m not.”



Bobby glared at Ralph. "You were going too fast."

"Be quiet," said Ralph.

The jack rabbit lay stretched-out on the highway. Its ruby-colored guts shone against the white concrete in the late-afternoon sun. Broken bones like knitting needles protruded from the torn flesh and fur. The eye that Ralph could see blinked with the bothersome regularity of a fluttering TV picture.

"What should we do?" asked Bobby.

"Take it to a vet," said Jane.

Ralph groaned, thinking of the inside of the car.

While they argued, a late-model, four-wheel-drive pickup truck with *Besserman's Gas & Grocery* printed on the door stopped across the highway from them. An angular section of welded steel with several trowel-like blades was chained to the truck bed. Probably a replacement part for the piece of farm equipment that Ralph hadn't recognized. Ralph hoped this particular Besserman or whoever he was wouldn't be as spooky as Cletus.

"Have car trouble?" It was a boy about fifteen.

"Sort of." Ralph hesitated.

From the blind side of the truck, a mongrel German Shepherd bolted across the driver's lap and through the open window, landing squarely on all fours on the pavement. He bared his teeth, growling from deep inside his throat. It sounded like a buzz saw cutting through hardwood.

"Damn you, Cody!" the boy cursed. "Get back in here."

The dog charged the rabbit, biting into its torn midsection, violently shaking it from side-to-side like a hunk of raw meat. Both Jane and Bobby screamed. A shower of blood cascaded across the pavement, staining the dead-brown grass at the edge of the road. Poxlike drops of blood spotted Ralph's arm and the white towel. He wondered what the side of his car looked like. The truck was spotted with blood. The boy wiped blood from his face with a blue handkerchief. He was out of the truck, stalking toward the dog. He kicked it hard in the ribs. Again. The dog cowered at his feet, the rabbit forgotten.

"I thought you were out of gas," the boy complained. His white t-shirt was flecked with blood. "If I'd known you'd hit a jack, I wouldn't have bothered to stop."

"We're new out here," Ralph said.

"I hope I didn't hurt Cody." The boy's hair hung in his eyes. The wind hadn't yet combed it straight-back or carved character into his bland face. He nudged the dog with his boot. "Get into the truck, Cody!" The dog obeyed.

"Is Cletus Besserman your father?"

“So you stopped at the station,” the boy said, turning a small smile for the first time. “No, I just work for Cletus. He owns that and the grain elevator. He’s a little crazy these days with the drought. The elevator’s been empty for two years. The bank’s ready to foreclose. Did he offer to buy your boy?”

Ralph nodded.

“It figures. He’s been pestering my dad about me, too. Cletus wants to go out on the reservation and talk some half-drunk Indian into a rain dance. Cletus’ old man sold him to the Indians when he was a boy. Lots of people did it back then during the Great Depression. My dad says there’s a state law that forbids it now.”

“Did it rain?” Ralph asked.

“I don’t know.”

“What happened to the children?” Ralph felt Bobby’s fingernails dig into his neck. Perhaps this would cure him of wanting to be an Indian.

“I don’t know,” the boy said. “My dad says that Cletus ran away. Maybe the Indians raised the others as their own. Maybe the dogs ate them. I don’t know.”

For the next couple of hours, Ralph drove the speed limit. He kept both hands on the steering wheel, checked his side view and rear view mirrors. He thought about Cletus Besserman and the drought. Bobby slept uneasily in the back seat. Jane said nothing, lost again in the nearly week-old *New York Times*.

In the west, the setting sun was turning the horizon into a river of blood. Ralph wished he had a camera. The photo might win a prize.

A few miles later, Ralph hit a prairie dog with his right front tire. Jane didn’t notice. The tiny crunch sounded like a bite taken out of an apple.

Eventually, Ralph started to count.

“Four, five, six . . .”

“What are you doing?” asked Jane.

“Counting.”

“Counting what? Empty houses?”

“No, I’m counting the dead animals on the highway.”

“That’s crazy,” Jane shouted, not looking up from the *Times* crossword puzzle. “So just stop it.”

Ralph drove deeper and deeper into the twilight haze. His eyes ached and burned. You’re right, he said to himself, I’ve been driving too long. He pushed the gas pedal to the floor. They had best get to Redemption as quickly as possible. Certainly before nightfall. In the rear view mirror he thought he saw another car in the far distance. For the next few miles he stared straight-ahead at the highway. He started counting the dead

animals again. He killed yet another prairie dog. Rechecking the mirror he saw that the car was a pickup truck, the same dirty green as the boy's.

Ralph pushed the gas pedal still harder. He imagined his foot breaking through the floorboards and striking the concrete. Shreds of shoe leather, bits of bone and flesh, and a shower of blood splattered his blue jeans. The pickup truck had inched closer. Behind it he saw Indians on horseback, their naked bodies streaked with paint.

"Jane," he said, "something's wrong, something's terribly wrong." He glanced at his wife. She was slumped against the door. No doubt she had taken another Valium. Maybe two or three. He knew better than to try to wake her. She would be groggy, dazed, more of a problem than a solution. He thought of waking Bobby.

The pickup truck and the Indians were gaining. Straight ahead the highway was dotted with the remains of dead animals. He swerved to avoid something not-quite-yet dead. Probably a farmer's dog or a coyote. In the rear view mirror he saw it get up from the pavement and join in the pursuit.

"Bobby," he said, half-turning to shake his son in the back seat. "Wake-up!"

The kid grunted, trying to dig himself deeper into the seat cushion. Ralph tried again. This time he grabbed Bobby by the waist and shook him. He pulled his hand away in frustration. The damned kid had wet his pants! It was hopeless, he thought, I'll have to go it alone.

In a few minutes it would be night, the sun finally dropping below the edge of the prairie. Ralph braced the steering wheel with his knees and rubbed his eyes with both hands. I'm hallucinating, he thought, I know that. When I open my eyes there will be nothing but highway behind us.

A fraction of a second before the impact, Ralph opened his eyes and flung his hands against the windshield to hold it in place. He was reaching into a spider's web. A nightmare explosion of glass washed across his body. He had hit something, something big. Probably a cow. The shaggy brown creature had erupted from the pavement and somehow landed on the hood, its great head and horns shattering the windshield. Ralph remembered the eyes. They were yellow like the headlights of an approaching car and angry. Perhaps he had hit a car, perhaps the pickup truck and somehow gotten ahead of him and had been blocking the road. He imagined Cletus Besserman reaching out to take Bobby from them.

"You're okay, sir." Ralph stared into the pimply face of an ambulance attendant. He was not confused. He remembered what had happened. They had been in an accident.

"We're going to get you into Redemption, to the hospital."

A rainbow of harsh lights lit up the accident scene. Some flashed on-&-off like the neon beer signs at Besserman's Gas & Grocery. Ralph was on a stretcher. He stared straight-up into the black night sky.

"They hit a buffalo," someone said.

"Got loose, wandered onto the highway," someone else said.

"Belongs to Charley Birdsong," the first voice said. "He raises them for meat."

"That damned Indian."

Ralph shuddered beneath the blanket. He strained against the belts that held him to the stretcher. He hadn't been alone in the car. They hadn't mentioned Jane or Bobby.

"My family," he said, "what about my wife and son?"

"She's okay," the attendant said. There was a pause. "Don't worry about the boy. He's in good hands, the best hands."

Ralph stared straight-up into the black night sky.

A raindrop splashed on his forehead. He had seen it coming, then another and another. They fell out of the black night into the garish dome of light.

Bobby was dead.

A clap of thunder was followed by a downpour. The icy-cold rain washed the blood from his face. Bobby was dead and it was raining.

"Next stop Redemption," someone said.

Ralph almost laughed at the irony of that.

The stretcher was lifted from the ground and slid into the ambulance.

Ralph heard the rain drumming on the roof.

He tried to block the sound out of his mind.

He clenched his teeth.

He prayed that Bobby was still alive, that Jane was still beautiful, that none of this was happening.

"There's been a drought for months, for years," the ambulance attendant said. The pimply-faced kid paused, getting himself comfortable next to Ralph. "Thank God for the rain."



## Never Grow Up

John Gordon

*There seems to exist some unwritten rule against including more than one story by any one author in an anthology (unless under the disguise of a pseudonym). This taboo has never been a problem with The Year's Best Horror Stories, inasmuch as a good writer may well publish several outstanding stories within a given year. In the past, Harlan Ellison, Ramsey Campbell, and Brian Lumley have each appeared twice in the same volume of The Year's Best Horror Stories. John Gordon has now joined that distinguished list of authors who have written two of the year's finest horror stories.*

*"Never Grow Up" is another story from Gordon's collection, Catch Your Death and Other Ghost Stories. By no means a children's book, the collection deserves recognition as a superior book of horror stories" ranging from "The Pot of Basil" (a story M. R. James would have been proud to have written) to the disquieting psychological horror of "Never Grow Up" (which would be quite at home in Charles L. Grant's noted Shadows series).*

ME MUM IS VERY good looking. Everyone says so. 'Specially me dad. And it ain't just men, but men mainly. She love it when she see a man. I see her eyes go blacker when a man come along—it don't matter who he is or how old he is, or even if he's a kid like me, her eyes go *black black*—know what I mean?—with a kind of sparkle they're so deep black, and her mouth go squashy. It do. It used to go squashy for me when I was very little. Not now.

"You changed," she say to me one day. "You changed the instant you was thirteen."

"Well I can't help that, can I?" I say to her. "Everyone get older. Even you."

That had her. She didn't like that.

"Trouble with you is," she say, "you gone all bony and ugly, I see that

the instant you come to be thirteen. And another thing," she say, "you still got baby ways."

Just a minute, me nose is running. I can't stick it this close to the crack without it getting a dribble. Seems to steam up. Don't worry, I ain't going away. There's nobody coming to chase me away, and there ain't likely to be, not at this time of night. Not here.

I ain't afraid to be in a graveyard, Sarah Graham. Not with you. I told you I cleaned all the moss out of your name and them dates. Eighteen-eighty is a long time ago, Sarah, but you was only twelve when it happened so I suppose you ain't gone on from there in a way. You never did get to be thirteen and bloody ugly—anyway you wasn't a boy, so it was different for you.

It must be funny being buried. Especially if you're fairly posh. I mean you can't expect to die when you're a kid if you live in a big house an' all. That's why they put this big stone box thing over you, I expect, and the railings all round. They didn't like the idea of you being dead in the same way as other people. Won't happen to me. Wish it would. Me own little stone house. I should be the same as you. I'd get behind them cracks and listen.

I should think you was good looking, Sarah. Probably a blondie. Long hair and all that. I bet you died of consumption like the rest of 'em. But I don't expect you enjoyed it much. Sorry I spoke.

Me mum have black hair like her eyes and she do it different practically every day. Boring it is. She's always got her head over the sink, washing it. We got a bathroom but she use the sink because she needs the space. Then there's wrapping it up in towels and drying it, and combing it and looking at herself. Takes hours. And she goes on at *me* about being childish.

I got a train set, Sarah. I expect you know what a train is. You went in there a hundred years ago and I know you was only twelve but you must have seen trains. Mine's electric—it don't matter what that means because mine looks just the same as yours. Funnels and that, just like it was still steam, because I like it. I go back and back into the past when I run that. And that's not all. I go little. That's what she don't like, me lying on the floor and imagining I'm a right tiny little man and can climb up them little steps over the wheels and stand on that tin platform and feel it rocking under me feet.

"I don't know why I ever bothered to have you," she say. "Why don't you grow up?"

There ain't no need, Sarah Graham, is there? You never bothered

getting old and all that. Not that you had much choice, I expect. Me dad didn't either.

And he weren't really old. Not really. Thirty-three—just over twice your age. I seen that on the death certificate. You got one of them somewhere, Sarah. I ain't. Not yet. I should like to see mine; must be interesting. I suppose I could find yours in a museum or something and read it to you. But there ain't time; not now. I seen me dad's. Cause of death and all that. Couldn't understand it, but I know what it was.

I got to stand up for a minute. Me legs is stiff. But if I keep saying things I expect you'll hear because being dead is different. It's got to be, or else there ain't no point. I know you ain't come out yet, but I reckon you could see things out here I can't. All this long grass and them black trees, they're thick with things. Things standing there, thinner than paper. Curtains and curtains of 'em. You can feel them touch as you move.

Your mum and dad might be there, except they ain't buried here. That's a mystery to me, Sarah, when they spent so much money on stones for you. I reckon that's why I cleaned up your name, because you was by yourself. Me dad ain't here either. I don't now where he is.

Christ!

Oosh, that made me jump. Bloody old owl went by like a ball of black fluff. Couldn't hear the old sod till he was practically on me bloody shoulder.

Listen, Sarah, I'll put me breath through the crack and you'll hear. I don't want to say it. I don't. I don't.

I don't know where me dad is. They cremated him. Rose bush, that's all he's got. And his name on a sign stuck in the ground. He ain't got a place like you, Sarah, with moss and stuff. And he ain't where they put him. I can't find him. They should've scattered him on the reccey; on the football pitch. He weren't bad in goal. A bit slow, but big. I would've known where to go for him if they scattered him there. And I would've kept a little pinch of him and put him in me train.

I seen his certificate but nobody know what he really died of, except me. And her. She ought to. She done him in, Sarah. Nobody say it, but she done it.

Him and me used to get on the floor when I had me train running. We used to look at each other through the train wheels as it went by. We put our ears on the carpet and you could hear it rumble like it was huge and heavy.

We was doing it that day when she come in and seen us. I wasn't paying much attention to her, but I should've. First thing I noticed was her voice.



“Look what I married,” she say. “Bloody great kid. Playing with his little train set.”

That begun it. I never see a row to match that one. Me dad went mad. He jumped up and kicked me train over. Then he stamped on it. And he yelled at her.

“I don’t give a bugger about train sets!” he said. “And I don’t give a bugger about you!”

She didn’t say nothing. Not for a long time. She just looked at him until all the glitter had gone out of her eyes, then she say, “I’m going out.” She was all quiet like she had gone solid. It was only her face that was saying the words.

I didn’t cry, Sarah. But I seen me dad cry. He was picking up me busted train and telling me he’d get a new one. He did an’ all. Sometimes he fling his money about like he hate the stuff. He got me a new train. Just the same. And some new track and stuff. It was better than before, and he should’ve loved it but he never come down on the floor with me after that.

He sat and watched telly a lot, and she went out.

Me mum ain’t a tart, Sarah. Jeff Black say that once and he was sorry he ever opened his mouth. I just about wiped him out. His face was one mass of blood when I finished with him—except I didn’t finish. They pulled me off, else he’d be dead. Like me dad. I wish it was him instead of me dad.

Stone’s getting wet again, Sarah. Got to wipe it, and me nose. Is it nice and dry in there? Must be, because there ain’t no cracks in the top, just this one down the side. I bet it’s peaceful. Well it is out here, I suppose, and the long grass is all right for lying down in. I could live here, Sarah. Well, stay here, anyway.

What was your parents like? Don’t bother to tell me; it don’t matter. I know what you was like with your blondie hair all spread out on the pillow when you was dying. They was watching you and crying like mad, I expect. And then the house all dark, and you in your coffin, and flowers. That’s the one thing I can’t stand about funerals, the flowers. The smell make you feel sick like it’s wrapping up the dead person as if there was something wrong with him and they wanted to hide it.

Me dad’s funeral was pretty quick when it happened. Nobody wanted to know about him once they’d all made their minds up what he done. They never knew about the tablets. That never come up. Hardly likely it would. They was *her* tablets.

She kept them in her handbag, didn’t she, because she always say they was dangerous. So they was, but for a long time I never knew what was

going on. He was just getting drunk every night. He was all right when he got drunk, mostly. She used to like it because he chucked his money about more than ever. But sometimes she go hard and say that's why we live where we do because we ain't got nothing. But after they had that row she got to letting him get drunk on his own, and then instead of being happy down the pub he'd sit and watch the telly and when he was really drunk he start to cry. That's what I didn't like. He were too big to do that, but he done it.

I'm getting sleepy, Sarah, lying here, but I got to tell you.

I see him get the whiskey bottle out every time the front door bang and she were gone, and he sit in the same place and I knew what were coming. I got so used to it I used to yawn. But then I see something else. Every time she went out, them tablets was on the telly. That little brown bottle sat there by itself, and it should have been in her handbag.

Every morning it was gone, but every night it was there when the whiskey bottle come out and he was on his own. I kept watching it. I hardly dare leave the room. That little bottle were like a bomb; that were like a little brown man squatting there, or looking like it was crawling forward like in that story with a label round it saying "Eat me, eat me" every time he was sorry for hisself. And that was every time he got drunk.

I watched her. I never say nothing. She always put them tablets down on the telly like it were casual, and a couple of times I handed them back to her, and she say, "Thank you, I better not be so careless."

But then it kept turning up in different places, close to him, and I was frit. I searched and searched every time she went out and when I found it I hid it till she came home.

I felt sick, Sarah. I feel sick now. She knew what I was doing, and she knew I couldn't say nothing. Not to her. I couldn't talk to me mother about something like that, could I? She never done nothing like she was being wicked or anything. She never let on, but that little bottle was always there somewhere and I was getting ill looking for it.

And it was my fault, Sarah, what happened. I made a mistake. I got so worried that what I done one night was pinch that bottle from her handbag, and when she found out she come at me in front of him.

"You little devil," she say. "I know what you done." And she put out her hand, twitching her fingers. "Give it over."

I didn't do nothing.

Me dad say to her, "What you on about?"

She say, "He been pinching from my handbag, that's what."

She held out her hand, and me dad watched. He hate people who nick things, do my dad. He near killed me when I done something like that

once before. But I couldn't take out that bottle, not in front of him. That were what she wanted me to do. Draw attention to it, so he see it next time she put it out, and next time he was drunk and crying he'd get ideas. So you know what I done, Sarah? It were terrible.

I let myself down in front of him. I made out I was a thief. I had a quid in me pocket and I took it out and I handed it to her. I didn't see me dad because I couldn't look at him; I just stood there with the quid, holding it out, like it was something rotten and filthy and I done it.

"See?" she say to him. "See what a nasty ugly little devil you got for a son. What use was it ever having him when he pinch from his own mother? It's you what done it. Playing with him like a kid. Bloody train sets, that's all you're good for. Call yourself a man? Bloody kid that's what you are."

My dad's big; he have tattoos and all that on his arms. He have a fish that can punch a brick in two; I seen him do it. I ain't never seen a man get nasty with him, but she done it.

It was like her lips pushed her nose out of the way. She was all gob. "You ain't a man," she say. "Never have been. I never thought you was a proper man, never. King o' the kids, that's you. King o' the bleeding kids."

I thought he was going to hit her then, but he never. I see his face and it was like a kid's just then. He have short hair, and it stuck up all bristles like a boy who have just had a haircut. He busted my heart, Sarah, that's what he done. Because he didn't even look at me. He just turned round and walked out.

"Good riddance!" she yell, and he just went out quiet as a mouse.

I never see him again, Sarah. They wouldn't even let me look.

She had my quid. She put it in her handbag and shut it. I didn't care, because she'd forgotten about them pills.

Sorry, Sarah, I just can't help laughing. She took my quid and on top of that she didn't have no need of them pills no more; not for him—they done their work and he never even seen them.

They done their work all right, and now they're doing it again. I never gave them back to her. She'll never get 'em now, because that's what I been scrunching while I been talking to you, Sarah. But you know that, because you been through it, and see what's happening to me. I reckon it's time you come out to fetch me, Sarah, while I'm looking up at the stars.

I still can't help laughing. I worried all the time about them pills and

me dad, but he never needed them. They found him on the allotments. In a shed. He used a bit of old rope, did my dad. He never had need of pills.



# Deadlights

Charles Wagner

*Charles Wagner is one of the students who have had the good fortune to take Dennis Etchison's creative writing class at U.C.L.A. Perhaps there's something to the idea that horror writers take delight in helping along new horror writers—much the same as vampires are always looking out for fresh blood.*

*Of himself, Wagner writes: "I was born December 8, 1957 in Beloit, Kansas, where I lived until finishing high school. For reasons that have become vague, I studied electrical engineering at the University of Kansas, receiving my degree in 1979. Quickly tiring of work in the field, I took writing classes in my spare time, finally moving to Los Angeles in 1982 where I began writing in earnest. It was with Dennis Etchison's help that my work began to pay off, and it was in his class that I met my wife, Margaret Coleman, who also writes. Presently my goal is to leave engineering forever. 'Deadlights' is my first published work and I am pleased that it was chosen to appear here—and no, the editor of this anthology is not my uncle."*

*"Deadlights" first appeared in Twisted Tales, one of the independently produced comic books that today continue the E.C. horror tradition. Interestingly, the same issue also features an adaptation of Etchison's story, "Wet Season." I think this is the first time that a prose version of a story from a comic book has appeared in an anthology.*

ON U.S. 24 BETWEEN Glasco and Beloit in Kansas, driving at night can be hazardous. Not all the headlights that follow you on that lonely, seventeen-mile stretch of road have cars connected to them.

Perhaps I should explain. Go back a few years.

It was late, around midnight. Bob, Dean, and I were heading back home to Beloit in Bob's Dodge Challenger. It was a fast car, so we usually took it. Dean's car wasn't exactly slow, but he kept messing it up and it

was in the garage now with a carburetor problem and wouldn't be ready till morning.

I never teased Dean much about his Mustang because it was better than what I had, which was nothing. Like his car, Dean himself often had problems.

At the time, Dean's primary problem was with Lori, his girlfriend of the last few months. Dean was talking really big about what a bitch she was but Bob and I knew that if he punted her, he could be in for a long dry spell.

That night, she had punted him.

Dean sat in back on the way home, pouting. Usually I sat in back, being the shortest of us, but tonight Dean wanted to sulk, so Bob—all 6'3" of him—encouraged Dean to sit in the back and let me ride up front.

The whole business of Glasco was a little silly. Bob's cousin Valery lived there and we figured she was an 'in' to all the Glasco girls. Of course, Glasco was half the size of Beloit so "all the Glasco girls" didn't really come to a lot.

We usually did all right, though. Especially Bob, because of his height and looks. Tonight, however, Dean's fight with Lori had dominated affairs.

We were quiet. A Led Zeppelin tape dangled from the eight-track but we were tired of it, and not feeling particularly rowdy, so we left it off. The only sounds were the rush of air and Bob's engine. It was warm so we had both front windows open. Wheat fields and milo cane went by in the dark flanking U.S. 24.

We had set a personal record after school that Friday: Running Le Mans-style to the car and driving like hell, we made it to Glasco in eleven minutes from the sound of the school bell. Our best time in four years of Glasco runs. It being April of our senior year (75 was our year and the number in our class), few opportunities remained to equal or surpass it.

Late that night, the legal limit was all the faster we felt like going.

"Shit!"

Dean was grumbling in the back seat, but Bob and I didn't pay any attention to him as he was probably still upset about Lori.

"Oh shit."

This time he sounded more worried than anything else.

I looked at Bob and he sighed audibly. "What is it, Dean?" Neither of us even glanced back at him.

"He's back."

"Who's back?" I asked.

"The lights."

"You mean there's a car behind us?" Bob said, trying to coax information out of him.

"No car—just headlights." Dean's voice was quiet with resolve.

Bob and I sneered at each other. I looked back.

There were a pair of headlights—bright beams—far, far behind us on 24. A month ago, Dean had told us a story about being followed by headlights that had no car making them. It was a story a couple of others around town had mumbled, most of those, drunk kids trying to explain away why they were out late by switching the subject to ghostly headlights. Like a lot of things Dead said, we took it with a grain of salt. (Dean is a good guy but he has that tendency to exaggerate.)

I squinted hard and saw only headlights, which was normal for that distance in the dark. Kansas is pretty flat and you can usually see for miles in open country.

"Okay, there's headlights back there," I reported.

I shrugged at Bob and he gave a mild head-shake. Dean was hunched into the Naugahyde, peering over the seat at the lights, as if they could detect him at that distance.

The headlights began to gain on us.

Bob pushed in the Led Zeppelin tape. "Communication Breakdown" poured out of the speakers. I flinched and lowered the volume on the tape deck.

"Look," Dean said. He was frozen in position, staring out the back window.

The headlights were really coming on now. Still on bright beam, they glanced off the rear view mirror into Bob's eyes.

"I wish he'd dim those things," Bob muttered.

"He never does," Dean placidly said.

"Is the driver a he?" I asked.

Dean shrugged. "There isn't any driver that you can see, I just say that."

By now, the headlights had drawn very near, making the cabin of Bob's Challenger almost as bright as day. Dean seemed to be trying to merge with the car seat. Bob motioned outside the window with his hand, waving the car past, but the lights stayed glued to our fender. I couldn't see any car, but then, the light was awfully bright.

The car, or whatever it was, didn't pass us. I began making half-peace-sign gestures at the lights with my hand. Bob maintained his speed, muttering "asshole" under his breath. "—communication breakdown, it's always the saaammmeeee—" rattled the speakers.

"Another minute . . ." Dean said.



My eyes adjusted to the glare a little bit and I still couldn't see a car. The old highway 41 turnoff drew near.

"About now . . ." Dean said, his voice softly patient.

The headlights eased off our tail, slowing to a near halt. They made the turn onto old 41. I tried to see what kind of car was behind them but my eyes were adjusted to light too much to permit me to see anything other than the headlights swerving and Dean looking at me for some kind of confirmation.

"Well?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," was all I could say.

"I was busy driving," Bob said, pulling the tape out and sounding as apologetic as he could.

When we dropped Dean off at his house, he was still pissed at us.

Bob came over to my place that Saturday for a game of horse. We always played horse or one-on-one, but I preferred horse since I was short and had never won at the other. We were shooting the ball well that day with our shirts off and hanging from the trellis that marked the court's east boundary. Winter-pale, we were hoping to start our tans. The score was "ho" to "ho."

Dean's car swung into the drive and pulled up to the west side of the court. Dean stepped out with flourish, the perennial Banner Drive-Inn glass of Coke in his hand. (I swear, the guy drank more pop than a little-league team.) We expected him to whip off his shirt and join the game.

Instead, he sauntered coolly over to the trellis and sucked on his Coke. "Guess what I heard," he said, staring into the cup.

I held the ball to my hip and waited.

"Well?" Bob said.

Dean pulled off the lid and stirred the ice with his straw. "Sumthin about those headlights . . ."

"Yeah," I said. "Whad'ya hear?"

Dean cocked the cup to his mouth and tapped some ice in. "Some guy got killed in a wreck twenty years ago," he said, his words slurry with ice, "out by the old 41 turnoff. My dad told me about it."

I won't repeat Dean's version of the tale. Since that Saturday, I've studied the incident and what follows is my version of what the papers reported:

There was a guy named Bill Phillips. His friends had called him "Tank" because he was built like a fire-plug, was strong, and had played fullback in school. He was a mechanic and a 1953 BHS grad. He had been driving

back from Glasco in a big hurry and apparently tried to turn on to old 41. He was going too fast and rolled his Merc. His neck was broken. That was in May of 1955.

That was all the papers told me, but I did some talking around and learned more. It was Bob's aunt—Valery's mom—that gave me most of the real story behind that odd wreck.

She said that Tank had been dating her best friend, Becky Hunter. Both girls lived in Glasco, so Tank did a lot of commuting between Beloit and Glasco, much as we did. Tank had been dating Becky for four years and he was working up to a proposal that Becky probably would've rejected, or so Bob's aunt believed.

She said Becky liked Tank all right, but she really wanted to go on to college and get a degree. Usually when a girl leaves Glasco—or Beloit, for that matter—for college, she meets a lot of new people. Most never come back, except for visits. And Tank was the kind of guy who wanted to settle down in Beloit.

Well anyway, Tank never got a chance to propose. He went to Glasco that May evening to see Becky but Bob's aunt told him she had already gone out. Hopping mad, Tank tore off in his Merc, hoping, probably, to overtake Becky and her date. Since Glasco didn't have a movie house, he figured they'd head for Beloit.

When Bob's aunt reached this part, it was pretty obvious to guess the rest. Driving hard at night, Tank undoubtedly wanted to get to Beloit before the show let out so he could catch the new guy and Becky before they got to their car. But when he got near the old 41 turnoff, another thought probably occurred to him.

Even in 1955, 41 was a vintage strip of road. Made in the '20s, it was a narrow piece of old, cracked concrete that ran north-south for thirty miles. It wasn't very well traveled but its shallow ditches made for excellent parking.

The thought that maybe, just maybe, Becky and this new guy were parking on old 41 got to Tank so hard, he didn't know which way to go. So he ended up going nowhere.

If you believe in ghosts, it's not hard to imagine Tank's ghost tearing up U.S. 24 looking for Becky. He'd keep his brights on so he could peer inside cars to see if Becky was there. Then he'd complete the turn onto old 41.

That's a pretty stupid notion.

Not many folks claim to have seen ghostly headlights on 24, and if they were for real, there wasn't much they could do to a person. Besides,

Becky Hunter Collins moved to New York back in 1960 and Bob's aunt assured me that it wasn't fear of headlights that made the move so attractive to her.

But in 1975, the newspaper story was all Bob, Dean, and I knew about the whole affair. Bob and I remained convinced that Dean was exaggerating about the "mysterious" headlights, but we were intrigued nonetheless.

That Saturday evening, the three of us cruised Mill Street in Bob's Dodge before making the inevitable trip to Glasco. We had dates, except for Dean, but the prospect of encountering the lights again was stronger than any dim hope of sex.

We reached Glasco at sundown. Val joined us to keep Dean company.

The night was uneventful. We parked in a cemetery, hoping for some necking, but the girls weren't very scare-prone and easily avoided our attempts at "comfort." Disgusted, we took them home and left Glasco, but not before several hours had passed and four six-packs were downed.

On the way back, I was in my customary place in the back seat. Bachman-Turner Overdrive was singing at us to "stay awake all night" over the eight-track and the windows were down. Lounging drunkenly, I glanced out the back.

There were headlights to the rear.

I watched for half a mile until the headlights became a red pickup that took the first farm turnoff. I sat back and watched Beloit twinkle in the west.

"—stay awake, stay awake—" the tape deck throbbed.

Sitting in the back reminded me of the times I sat in the back of Dad's big Chrysler when we were coming back from trips to Topeka to see my uncle. I'd stretch out in the back but wouldn't sleep.

I never sleep in cars.

Peering out the window, I'd gaze as far as I could see over the land. On the horizon, sometimes, thunderheads would stand, lit like pink cauliflower by lightning.

Other times, it would appear that there were large, vague objects trundling along—like nebulous tumbleweeds or something—trying to keep pace with our car. They would move just outside the edge of sight, rolling and lurching along, but finally fall far behind. Others would be there to take up the chase until we got near town and the lights drove them away.

I knew they were illusions, like water on the road on a sunny day, but it was neat to imagine them chasing us.

Fortunately, we never had a flat or engine trouble.

Over the years, things didn't change all that much. When I got my restricted license, I began dreaming of a car of my own . . . but I remained stuck in back seats.

While reminiscing, I looked out the Challenger's side window into the darkness. I saw nothing strange—a farm light and a thunderhead far in the north. Lightning flashed inside the cloud. The color was blue like brains.

Light flashed suddenly in the compartment. I looked back to see two headlights on hi-beam coming over a low rise a mile back. They were gaining on us—fast.

Bachman-Turner switched songs. "Let it Ride" blared over the speakers.

I closed my eyes, trying to keep the pupils opened wide, and looked again.

There was no car visible behind the lights. Brightness became glare inside our car.

"Bob, Dean—he's here." Dean looked back as Bob stayed fixed to the road.

"Shit, it's him," Dean said. The headlights came right behind us like the night before. "—wouldja let it ride?" the tape deck asked.

"I don't see a car, fellas," I dutifully reported.

"Fuck him!" Bob growled, stomping on the pedal. The Challenger roared and hit 70.

The headlights didn't fade an inch.

"I can't hear an engine on that thing!" I shouted, not really sure that I could've heard anything at all outside the car.

The headlights stayed mutely on our tail at 85 mph.

"C'mon, Bob!" Dean pleaded. "Why bother?"

"It's been a shit-night and I wanna lose this ghost!"

"What!?" I yelled as we went over 90. "—would you say good-bye, wouldja let it ride—" Randy Bachman shrieked over the speakers.

"May as well try!!" Bob shouted, letting it all out on the floorboards. The car roared up to 100 mph.

The headlights didn't waver. It was high-noon bright inside the Challenger.

The 41 turnoff loomed ahead.

"I'll take the turn and he'll follow!" Bob yelled.

"No!!" Dean wailed. He reached for the wheel. Bob turned to slap his hand away. "—ride, ride, ride, let it ride—" chanted the tape deck. I grabbed an armrest and dropped to the floor.

We skipped off the road and jumped the ditch at 90 mph. The

Challenger bucked hard into the cultivated earth and the tires blew out. Dirty milo cane churned into the car as I buffeted fetally on the floor, my arm cracking against the back seat as we ground to a dead halt in the milo field. Our headlights faintly lit the dead, brown stalks all around us. The tape had broken and FM hiss played softly in the car.

In the front seat, Bob and Dean remained, their heads imbedded in the dashboard.

Painfully, I turned my head and looked out, back through the swath we had made, and saw the headlights in the road. They had stopped, as if to allow their invisible driver to view the accident, and then started moving slowly forward. I watched them pass by, but they didn't turn on to old highway 41.

They just switched off.

There isn't much more to tell.

It's been four years since the wreck, and since then, I've gotten my college diploma and a car of my own. In a few weeks, I'll be moving to Wichita to start a new job, but for now, it feels good sitting comfy in Beloit.

I reckon while I'm here visiting the folks, I'll stop by Bob and Dean's graves and leave them some flowers. That might make them feel a little better.

Lately, the talk around town is that the headlights that follow you from Glasco are back. The few that have seen them say they're different: four beams now, instead of two. Like the hi-beams of a Dodge. I know the rumor is true because I've seen the headlights myself.

Come to think of it, I'd *better* put flowers on my friends' graves.

Last night, coming into town, they tried to run me off the road.

## Talking in the Dark

Dennis Etchison

*In the case of the frequent contributors to The Year's Best Horror Stories, it sometimes becomes a strain to write something new about them with each new introduction. Looking back over my own and previous editor Gerald W. Page's introductions to stories by Dennis Etchison, I note one pleasant change over the years: It is no longer accurate to describe Dennis Etchison as "unknown and unjustly neglected." It took a few years, but Etchison has now firmly established himself as one of the horror genre's premier authors.*

*Born in Stockton, California on March 30, 1943, Etchison now lives in Los Angeles, where he teaches creative writing at U.C.L.A. Most recently, he has been hired as story editor for "The Hitchhiker" horror/fantasy series on HBO. Etchison's books include film novelizations of The Fog, Halloween II, Halloween III, and Videodrome (the last three under the pseudonym Jack Martin); two short story collections, The Dark Country and Red Dreams, and a novel, Darkside. "Talking in the Dark" was first published in Charles L. Grant's Shadows 7. Any resemblance to actual horror fans or horror writers is unimaginable.*

IN THE DAMP bedroom Victor Ripon sat hunched over his desk, making last-minute corrections on the ninth or tenth draft, he couldn't remember which, of a letter to the one person in the world who might be able to help. Outside, puppies with the voices of children struggled against their leashes for a chance to be let in from the cold. He ignored them and bore down. Their efforts at sympathy were wasted on him; he had nothing more to give. After thirty-three years he had finally stepped out of the melodrama.

He clicked the pen against his teeth. Since the letter was to a man he had never met, he had to be certain that his words would not seem naïve or foolish.

"Dear Sir," he reread, squinting down at the latest version's cramped,

meticulously cursive backhand. He lifted the three-hole notebook paper by the edges so as not to risk smearing the ballpoint ink. "Dear Sir . . ."

First let me say that I sincerely hope this letter reaches you. I do not have your home address so I have taken the liberty of writing in care of your publisher. If they forward it to you please let me know.

I am not in the habit of writing to authors. This is the first time. So please bear with me if my letter is not perfect in spelling, etc.

I have been reading your Works for approximately 6 yrs., in other words since shortly after I was married but more about that later. Mr. Christian, Rex if I may call you that and I feel I can, you are my favorite author and greatest fan. Some people say you are too morbid and depressing but I disagree. You do not write for children or women with weak hearts (I am guessing) but in your books people always get what they deserve. No other author I have read teaches this so well. I can see why you are one of the most popular authors in the world. I have all 6 of your books, I hope there are only 6, I wouldn't like to think I missed any! (If so could you send me a list of the titles and where I might obtain them? A S.A.S.E is enclosed for your convenience. Thank you.)

My favorite is *THE SILVERING*, I found that to be a very excellent plot, to tell the truth it scared the shit out of me if you know what I mean and I think you do, right? (Wink wink.) *MOON OVER THE NEST* is right up there, too. My wife introduced me to your novels, my ex-wife I should say and I guess I should thank her for that much. She left me 2 1/2 yrs. ago, took the kids to San Diego first and then to Salt Lake City I found out later. I don't know why, she didn't say. I have tried to track her down but no luck. Twice with my late parents' help I found out where she was staying but too late. So that is the way she wants it, I guess. I miss the kids though, my little boy especially.

In your next book, *THE EDGE*, I noticed you made one small mistake, I hope you don't mind my pointing it out. In that one you have Moreham killing his old girlfriend by electrocution (before he does other things to her!) while she is setting up their word processor link. Excuse me but this is wrong. I know this because I was employed in the Computer Field after dropping out of Pre-Med to support my family. The current utilized by a Mark IIIA terminal is not enough to produce a lethal shock, even if the interface circuits were wired in sequence as you describe (which is impossible anyway, sorry, just thought you might like to know). Also the .066 nanosecond figure should be corrected . . . .

And so on in a similar vein. Victor worked his way through three more

densely packed pages of commentary and helpful advice regarding Rex Christian's other bestsellers, including *Jesus Had A Son*, *The Masked Moon*, and the collection of short stories, *Nightmare Territory*, before returning to more personal matters.

If you ever find yourself in my neck of the woods please feel free to drop by. We could have a few beers and sit up talking about the many things we have in common. Like our love of old movies. I can tell you feel the same way about such "classics" (?) as ROBOT INVADERS, MARS VS. EARTH and HOUSE OF BLOOD from the way you wrote about them in your series of articles for TV GUIDE. I subscribed so I wouldn't miss a single installment. There are others we could talk about, even watch if we're lucky. I get Channel 56 here in Gezira, you may have heard about it, they show old chestnuts of that persuasion all night long!!

If you have not guessed by now, I too try my hand at writing occasionally myself. I have been working for the past 1 1/2 yrs. on a story entitled PLEASE, PLEASE, SORRY, THANK YOU. It will be a very important story, I believe. Don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to read it. (You are probably too busy, anyway.) Besides, I read WRITER'S DIGEST so I know where to send it if and when I succeed in bringing it to a satisfactory stage of completion. But you are my inspiration. Without you I would not have the courage to go on with it at all.

He hesitated before the conclusion, as he had when first drafting it four nights ago. On the other side of the window pane the sky was already smoking over with a fine mist, turning rapidly from the color of arterial blood to a dead slate gray. The sea rushed and drubbed at the coastline a mile to the west, shaking and steadily eroding the bedrock upon which his town was built; the vibrations which reached the glass membrane next to him were like the rhythms of a buried human heart.

There is one more thing. I have a very important question to ask you, I hope you don't mind. It is a simple thing (to you) and I'm sure you could answer it. You might say I should ask someone else but the truth is I don't know anyone else who could help. What I know isn't enough. I thought it would be but it isn't. It seems to me that the things we learned up until now, the really important things, and I can tell we've had many of the same experiences (the Sixties, etc.), when it came time to live them, the system balked. And we're dying. But don't worry, I'm a fighter. I learned a long time ago: never give up.

I live in my parents' old house now, so we could have plenty of privacy.



In my opinion we could help each other very much. My number is 474-2841. If I'm not here I'll be at the Blue & White (corner of Rosetta and Damietta), that is where I work, anybody can tell you where to find it. I hope to hear from you at your earliest convenience.

Meanwhile I'm waiting with bated breath for your book of essays, *OTHER CEDENTS*, they mentioned it on *Wake Up, America* and I can hardly wait! If you care to let me read the manuscript prior to publication I promise to return it by Express Mail in perfect condition. (Just asking, hint hint.) In any event please come by for a visit on your next trip to the West Coast. I hope you will take me up on it sometime (soon!), I really need the answer. We Horror Fans have to stick together. As you said in your Introduction to *NIGHTMARE TERRITORY*, "It may be a long time till morning, but there's no law against talking in the dark."

Faithfully Yours,  
*Victor Ripon*

He sat back. He breathed in, out. It was the first breath he had been aware of taking for several minutes. The view from the window was no longer clear. A blanket of fog had descended to shroud all evidence of life outside his room. The puppies next door had quieted, resigned to their fate. Still, a hopeful smile played at the corners of his mouth. He stacked and folded the pages to fit the already stamped envelope. There. Now there wasn't anything to do but wait.

He stretched expansively, hearing his joints pop like dry bones, and his fingernails touched the window. So early, and yet the glass was chillingly brittle, ready to shatter under the slightest provocation.

With any luck he wouldn't have long to wait at all.

The days shrank as the season contracted, drawing inward against the approaching winter. Trees bared stiffening limbs, scraped the sky and etched patterns of stars as sharp and cold as diamond dust above the horizon. Victor got out his old Army jacket. The main house became dank and tomblike, magnifying the creaking of dry-rotted timbers. He took to sleeping in the guest cabin, though the portable heater kept him tight and shivering night after night.

He pressed bravely ahead with his story, the outlines and preliminary versions of which by now filled two thick notebooks, reorganizing, redrafting, and obsessively repolishing lines and paragraphs with a jeweler's precision.

But it was not good enough.

He wanted the pages to sing with ideas that had once seemed so

important to him, all and everything he knew, and yet they did not, and no amount of diligence was able to bring them to life. The story came to be a burden and weighed more heavily in his hands each time he lifted it out of the drawer. After a few weeks he was reluctant to open the desk at all.

He stayed in bed more but slept less, dragging himself up for work each day only at the last possible minute. Nothing except Rex Christian's books held any interest for him now, and he had read them all so many times he believed he knew them by heart, almost as well as his own stillborn effort. Channel 56 exhausted its library of late-night movies and sold out to a fundamentalist religious sect peddling fire and brimstone. The nights lengthened and the long winter closed around him.

Each day, he thought, I die a little. I must. I get out of bed, don't I?

Mornings, he walked the two miles along the creek into town, reexamining the last few years like beads to be memorized in his pocketed fists before they slipped away forever. He walked faster, but his life only seemed to recede that much more swiftly across the dunes and back to the sea. He could neither hold on to nor completely forget how things had once been. Whether or not they had ever truly been the way he remembered them was not the point. The spell of the past, his past, real or imagined, had settled over him like the shadow of giant wings, and he could not escape.

He submerged himself in his work at the shop, a space he rented for small appliance repair behind the Blue & White Diner, but that was not enough, either. For a time he tried to tell himself that nothing else mattered. But it was an evasion. You can run, he thought, but you can't hide. Rex Christian had taught him that.

Some days he would have traded anything he owned and all that he had ever earned to wake up one more time with the special smell of her on his pillow—just that, no matter whether he ever actually set eyes on her again. Other days his old revenge fantasies got the better of him. But all that was real for him now was the numbness of more and more hours at the shop, struggling to penetrate the inner workings of what others paid him to fix, the broken remnants of households which had fallen apart suddenly, without warning or explanation.

When not busy at work, the smallest of rewards kept him going. The weekly changes of program at the local movie theater, diverting but instantly forgettable; the specialties of the house at the Blue & White, prepared for him by the new waitress, whose name turned out to be Jolene; and Jolene herself when business was slow and there was nowhere else to go. She catered to him without complaint, serving

something, perhaps, behind his eyes that he thought he had put to rest long ago. He was grateful to her for being there. But he could not repay her in kind. He did not feel it, could not even if he had wanted to.

By late December he had almost given up hope.

The weekends were the worst. He had to get out, buttoned against the cold, though the coffee in town was never hot enough and the talk after the movies was mindless and did not nourish. But he could bear the big house no longer, and even the guest cabin had begun to enclose him like a vault.

This Saturday night, the last week before Christmas, the going was painfully slow. Steam expanded from his mouth like ectoplasm. He turned up his collar against an icy offshore wind. There were sand devils in the road, a halo around the ghost of a moon which hung over his shoulder and paced him relentlessly. At his side, to the north, dark reeds rustled and scratched the old riverbank with a sound of rusted blades. He stuffed his hands deeper into his jacket and trudged on toward the impersonal glow of the business district.

The neon above the Blue & White burned coolly in the darkness.

The nightlife in Gezira, such as it was—Siamese silhouettes of couples cruising for burgers, clutches of frantic teenagers on their way to or from the mall—appeared undiscouraged by the old. If anything, the pedestrians scissoring by seemed less inhibited than ever, pumping reserves of adrenaline and huffing wraiths of steam as if their last-minute shopping mattered more than anything else in this world. The bubble machine atop a police car revolved like a deranged Christmas tree light. Children giggled obscenities and fled as a firecracker resounded between lamp-posts; it might have been a gunshot. The patrol car spun out, burning rubber, and screeched past in the wrong direction.

He took a breath, opened the door to the diner and ducked inside.

The interior was clean and bright as a hospital cafeteria. A solitary pensioner dawdled at the end of the counter, spilling coffee as he cradled a cup in both hands. Twin milkshake glasses, both empty, balanced near the edge. As Victor entered, jangling the bell, the waitress glanced up. She saw him and beamed.

“Hi!”

“Hi, yourself.”

“I’ll be a few more minutes. Do you mind? The night girl just called. She’s gonna be late.” Jolene watched him as she cleaned off the tables, trying to read his face as if it were the first page of a test. Her eyes flicked nervously between his.

"Take your time," he said. He drew off his gloves and shuffled up to the counter. "No hurry."

"The movie—?"

"We won't miss anything."

She blinked at him. "But I thought the last show—"

"It starts," he said, "when we get there."

"Oh." She finished the tables, clearing away the remains of what other people could not finish. "I see," she said. "Are—are you all right?"

"Yes."

"Well, you don't sound like it." She looked at him as if she wanted to smooth his hair, take his temperature, enfold him in her big arms and stroke his head. Instead, she wiped her hands and tilted her face quizzically, keeping her distance. "How about something to eat?"

"Just coffee," he said. "My stomach's . . ." He sought the precise word; it eluded him. He gave up. "It's not right."

"Again?"

"Again." He tried a smile. It came out wrong. "Sorry. Maybe next time."

She considered the plate which she had been keeping warm on the grill. It contained a huge portion of fried shrimp, his favorite. She sighed.

The door jingled and a tall man came in. He was dressed like a logger or survivalist from up north, with plaid shirt, hiking boots, full beard, and long hair. Victor decided he had never seen him before, though something about the man was vaguely familiar.

Jolene dealt out another setup of flatware. He didn't need a menu. He knew what he wanted.

Victor considered the man, remembering the sixties. That could be me, he thought; I could have gone that way, too, if I had had the courage. And look at him. He's better off. He doesn't have any attachments to shake. He opted out a long time ago, and now there's nothing to pull him down.

Jolene set the man's order to cooking and returned to Victor.

"It won't be long," she said. "I promise." She gestured at the old Zenith portable next to the cash register. "You want the TV on?"

She needed to do something for him, Victor realized. She *needed* to. "Sure," he said agreeably. "Why not?"

She flicked a knob.

The nightly episode of a new religious game show. "You Think That's Heavy?" was in progress. In each segment a downtrodden soul from the audience was brought onstage and led up a ramp through a series of possible solutions, including a mock employment bureau, a bank loan office, a dating service, a psychiatric clinic and, finally, when all else had

failed, a preacher with shiny cheeks and an unnatural preoccupation with hair. Invariably, this last station of the journey was the one that took. Just now a poor woman with three children and a husband who could not support them was sobbing her way to the top of the hill.

I hope to God she finds what she needs, Victor thought absently. She looks like she deserves it. Of course, you can't tell. They're awfully good at getting sympathy . . . .

But someone will come down and set things right for her, sooner or later. She'll get what she deserves, and it will be right as rain. I believe that.

But what about the kids? They're the ones I'm worried about . . . .

At that moment the door to the diner rang open and several small children charged in, fresh from a spree on the mall, clutching a few cheap toys and a bag of McDonald's french fries. They spotted the big man in the red plaid shirt and ran to him, all stumbles and hugs. The man winked at Jolene, shrugged, and relocated to a corner booth.

"Whatdaya gonna do?" he said helplessly. "I reckon I gotta feed 'em, right?"

"I'll get the children's menus," said Jolene.

"You got any chili dogs?" said the man. "We came a long way. Don't have a whole lot left to spend. Is that okay?"

"Give them the shrimp," suggested Victor. "I can't handle it."

Jolene winked back. "I think we can come up with something," she said.

The pensioner observed the children warily. Who could say what they might have brought in with them? He obviously did not want to find out. His hands shook, spilling more coffee. It ran between his fingers as if his palms had begun to bleed.

Well, thought Victor, maybe I was wrong. Look at the big guy now. He can't run away from it either. But it could be he doesn't want to. He's got them, and they'll stick by him no matter what. Lucky, I guess. What's his secret?

Out on the sidewalk passersby hurried on their way, a look of expectation and dread glazing their eyes. Victor picked up his coffee. It was almost hot enough to taste.

There was another burst of ringing.

He braced himself, not knowing what to expect. He scanned the doorway.

But this time it was not a customer. It was the telephone.

Jolene reached across the counter, pushing dirty dishes out of the way. One of the milkshake glasses teetered and smashed to the floor. At the

end of the counter, the pensioner jumped as though the spirit of Christmas past had just lain its withered fingers to the back of his neck.

"What?" Jolene balanced the receiver. "I'm sorry, there's so much—yes. I said yes. Hold on." She passed the phone to Victor. "It's for you," she said.

"It is?"

"Sure is," she said. "I can't tell if it's a—"

"Yes?"

"Victor?"

"Yeah?"

"Vic!" said the reedy voice on the line. "Great to get ahold of you, finally! This is Rex. Rex Christian!"

"Really?" said Victor, stunned.

"Yup. Look, I'll be passing through your town in about, oh, say an hour. I was just wondering. Are you free tonight, by any chance?"

"Uh, sure, Re—"

"Don't say my name!"

"Okay," said Victor.

"I'm on my way from a meeting in San Francisco. Traveling incognito, you might say. You don't know how people can be if the word gets out. So I'd appreciate it if, you know, you don't let on who you're talking to. Understand?"

"I understand." It must be hard, he thought, being a celebrity.

"I knew you would."

Victor cupped his hand around the mouthpiece. The old man from the end of the counter fumbled money from his coin purse and staggered out. Victor tried to say the right things. He wasn't ready. However, he remembered how to get to his own house. He gave directions from Highway 1, speaking as clearly and calmly as he could.

"Who was that?" asked Jolene when he had hung up.

"Nobody," said Victor.

"What?"

"A friend, I mean. He . . ."

"He what?"

"I've got to . . . meet him. I forgot."

Her expression, held together until now by nervous anticipation, wilted before his eyes. The tension left her; her posture sagged. Suddenly, she looked older, overweight, lumpen. He did not know what to say.

He grabbed his gloves and made ready to leave.

She smoothed her apron, head down, hiding a tic, and then made a

great effort to face him. The smile was right but the lines were deeper than ever before.

"Call me?" she said. "If you want to. It's up to you. I don't care."

"Jolene . . ."

"No, really! I couldn't take the cold tonight, anyway. I—I hope you have a nice meeting. I can tell it's important."

"Business," he said. "You know."

"I know."

"I'm sorry."

She forced a laugh. "What on earth for? Don't you worry."

He nodded, embarrassed.

"Take care of yourself," she said.

You deserve better, he thought, than me, Jolene.

"You, too," he said. "I didn't plan it this way. Please believe—"

"I believe you. Now get going or you'll be late."

He felt relieved. He felt awful. He felt woefully unprepared. But at least he felt something.

All the way home the hidden river ran at his side, muffled by the reeds but no longer distant. This time he noticed that there were secret voices in the waters, talking to themselves and to each other, to the night with the tongues of wild children on their way back to the sea.

Now he considered the possibility that they might be talking to him.

Victor unlocked the old house and fired up the heater. He had little chance to clean. By the time he heard the car, he was covered with a cold sweat, and his stomach, which he had neglected to feed, constricted in a hopeless panic.

He parted the bathroom curtains.

The car below was long and sleek. A limousine? No, but it was a late-model sedan, a full-size Detroit tank with foglights.

A man climbed out, lugging a briefcase, and made for the front of the house.

Victor ran downstairs and flung open the door.

He saw a child approaching in the moonlight. It was the same person he had seen leave the shadow of the car. From the upstairs window the figure had appeared deceptively foreshortened.

The boy came into the circle of the porch light, sticking his chin out and grinning rows of pearly teeth.

"Vic?"

Victor was confused.

Then he saw.

It was not a child, after all.

"I'm Rex Christian," said the dwarf, extending a stubby hand. "Glad to meet you!"

The hand felt cold and compressed as a rubber ball in Victor's grip. He released it with an involuntary shudder. He cleared his throat.

"Come on in. I—I've been expecting you."

The visitor wobbled to an overstuffed chair and bounced up onto the cushion. His round-toed shoes jutted out in front of him.

"So! This is where one of my biggest fans lives!"

"I guess so," said Victor. "This is it."

"Great! It's perfect!"

On the stained wall a grandfather clock sliced at the thick air.

"Can I get you something?" Victor's own voice sounded hollow in his ears. "Like something to drink?"

"I'd settle for a beer. Just one, though. I want to keep a clear head."

Beer, thought Victor. Let me see . . . He couldn't think. He looked away. The small face and the monkey mouth were too much for him. He wanted to laugh and cry at the same time.

"You owe me, remember?"

"What?"

"The beer. In your letter you said—"

"Oh. Oh, yeah. Just a minute."

Victor went to the kitchen. By the time he returned, he had replayed his visitor's words in his mind until he recognized the rhythm. Everything the dwarf—midget, whatever he was—had said so far fit the style. There was no doubt about it. For better or worse, the person in the other room was in fact Rex Christian. The enormity of the occasion finally hit him. Setting the bottles on the coffee table between them, he almost knocked one over.

My time has come, he thought. My problems are about to be over. My prayers have been answered.

"This must be pretty far out of the way for you," Victor said.

"Not at all! Thanks for the invitation."

"Yeah," said Victor. "I mean, no. I mean . . ."

And in that instant he saw himself, this house, his life as it really was for the first time. He was overwhelmed with self-consciousness and shame.

"Did . . . did you have any trouble finding the place?"

"Nope. Followed your directions. Perfect!"

Victor studied the virgules in the carpet, trying to find his next words there.



Rex Christian leaned forward in his chair. The effort nearly doubled him over.

"Look, I know what it's like for you."

"You do?"

"Believe me, I do. That's my business, isn't it? I've seen it all before."

Rex sat back and took a long pull from the tall bottle. His Adam's apple rolled like a ball bearing in his throat.

"You must know a lot about people," said Victor.

"Never enough. That's why I take a trip like this at least once a year." He chortled. "I rent a car, visit folks like you all over the country. It's a way of paying them back. Plus it helps me with my research."

"I see." There was an awkward pause. "You—you said you were in San Francisco. On business. Was that part of this year's trip?"

"Right. Nothing beats the old one-on-one, does it?"

So he didn't come all this way just to see me, thought Victor. There were others. "From your writing, well, I thought you'd be a very private person."

"I am! Somebody wants a book, they have to climb the mountain. But when it comes to my fans, it's a different story. They're raw material. I go to the source, know what I mean?"

"I used to be a people-person," said Victor, loosening up a bit. He drained his bottle. He thought of going for two more. But the writer had hardly touched his. "Now, well, I don't go out much. I guess you could say I've turned into more of a project-type person."

"Glad to hear it!"

"You are?"

"It just so happens I've got a project you might be interested in. A new book. It's called *A Long Time Till Morning*."

"I like the title," said Victor. "Excuse me."

He rose unsteadily and made a beeline for the stairs. The beer had gone through his system in record time. When he came out of the bathroom, he gazed down in wonderment from the top of the landing. Rex Christian was still sitting there, stiff and proper as a ventriloquist's dummy. I can't believe this is happening, he thought. Now everything's changed. There he is, sitting in my living room!

His heart pounded with exhilaration.

Let me never forget this. Every minute, every second, every detail. I don't want to miss a thing. This is important; this matters. The most important night of my life.

He bounded down the stairs and snagged two more beers and an opener from the kitchen, then reseated himself on the sofa.

Rex Christian greeted him with a sparkling grin.

"Tell me about your new book," said Victor breathlessly. "I want to hear everything. I guess I'll be the first, won't I?"

"One of the first." The author folded his tiny hands. "It's about an epidemic that's sweeping the country—I don't have the details yet. I'm still roughing it out. All I gave my editor was a two-page outline."

"And he bought it?"

Rex Christian grinned.

"What kind of epidemic?"

"That's where you can help, Vic."

"If it's research you want, well, just tell me what you need. I used to do a lot of that in school. I was in premed and—"

"I want to make this as easy as possible for you."

"I know. I mean, I'm sure you do. But it's no sweat. I'll collect the data, Xerox articles, send you copies of everything that's ever been written on the subject, as soon as you tell me. . . ."

Rex Christian frowned, his face wrinkling like a deflating balloon. "I'm afraid that would involve too many legalities. Copyrights, fees, that sort of thing. Sources that might be traced."

"We could get permission, couldn't we? You wouldn't have to pay me. It would be an honor to—"

"I know." Rex Christian's miniature fingers flexed impatiently. "But that's the long way around, my friend."

"However you want to do it. Say the word and I'll get started, first thing in the morning. Monday morning. Tomorrow's Sunday and—"

"Monday's too late. It starts now. In fact, it's already started. You didn't know that, did you?" Rex's face flushed eagerly, his cheeks red as a newborn infant's. "I want to know *your* feelings on the subject. All of them." He pumped his legs and crept forward on the cushion. "Open yourself up. It won't hurt. I promise."

Victor's eyes stung and his throat ached. *It starts here*, he thought, awestruck. The last thirty-three years were the introduction to my life. Now it really starts.

"You wouldn't want to know my feelings," he said. "They—I've been pretty mixed up. For a long time."

"I don't care about what you felt before. I want to know what you feel tonight. It's only *you*, Vic. You're perfect. I can't get that in any library. Do you know how valuable you are to me?"

"But why? Your characters, they're so much more real, more alive. . . ."

Rex waved his words aside. "An illusion. Art isn't life, you know. If it were, the world would be up in flames. It's artifice. By definition." He slid

closer, his toes finally dropping below the coffee table. "Though naturally I try to make it echo real life as closely as I can. That's what turns my readers on. That's part of my mission. Don't you understand?"

Victor's eyes filled with tears.

Other people, the people he saw and heard on the screen, on TV, in books and magazines, voices on the telephone, all had lives which were so much more vital than his own wretched existence. The closest he had ever come to peak experiences, the moments he found himself returning to again and again in his memory, added up to nothing more significant than chance meetings on the road, like the time he hitchhiked to San Francisco in the summer of '67, a party in college where no one knew his name, the face of a girl in the window of a passing bus that he had never been able to forget.

And now?

He lowered his head to his knees and wept.

And in a blinding flash, as if the scales had been lifted from his eyes, he knew that nothing would ever be the same for him again. The time to hesitate was over. The time had come at last to make it real.

He thought: I am entitled to a place on the planet, after all.

He lifted his eyes to the light.

The dwarf's face was inches away. The diminutive features, the taut lips, the narrow brow, the close, lidded eyes, wise and all-forgiving. The sweet scent of an unknown after-shave lotion wafted from his skin.

"The past doesn't matter," said the dwarf. He placed the short fingers of one hand on Victor's head. "To hell with it all."

"Yes," said Victor. For so long he had thought just the opposite. But now he saw a way out. "Oh, yes."

"Tell me what you feel from this moment on," said the dwarf. "I need to know."

"I don't know how," said Victor.

"Try."

Victor stared into the dark, polished eyes, shiny as a doll's eyes.

"I want to. I—I don't know if I can."

"Of course you can. We're alone now. You didn't tell anyone I was coming, did you, Vic?"

Victor shook his head.

"How thoughtful," said the dwarf. "How perfect. Like this house. A great setting. I could tell by your letter you were exactly what I need. Your kind always are. Those who live in out-of-the-way places, the quiet ones with no ties. That's the way it has to be. Otherwise I couldn't use you."

"Why do you care what I feel?" asked Victor.

"I told you—research. It gives my work that extra edge. Won't you tell me what's happening inside you right now, Vic?"

"I want to. I do."

"Then you can. You can if you really want it. Aren't we all free to do whatever we want?"

"I almost believed that, once," said Victor.

"Anything," said the dwarf firmly. "You can have anything, including what you want most. Especially that. And what is it you want, Vic?"

"I—I want to write, I guess."

The dwarf's face crinkled with amusement.

"But I don't know what to write about," said Victor.

"Then why do you want to do it?"

"Because I have no one to talk to. No one who could understand."

"And what would you talk to them about, if you could?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

"I'm afraid."

"Tell me, Vic. I'll understand. I'll put it down exactly the way you say it. You want me to relieve your fear? Well, in another minute I'm going to do that little thing. You will have nothing more to fear, ever again."

This is it, Victor thought, your chance. Don't blow it. It's happening just the way you had it planned. Don't lose your nerve. Ask the question—now. *Do it.*

"But where does it come from?" asked Victor. "The things you write about. How do you know what to say? Where do you get it? I try, but the things I know aren't—"

"*You want to know,*" said the dwarf, his face splitting in an uproarious grin, "*where I get my ideas? Is that your question?*"

"Well, as a matter of fact—"

"From you, Vic! I get my material from people like you! I get them from this cesspool you call life itself. And you know what? I'll never run out of material, not as long as I go directly to the source, because I'll never, ever finish paying you all back!"

Victor saw the large pores of the dwarf's face, the crooked bend to the nose, the sharpness of the teeth in the feral mouth, the steely glint deep within the black eyes. The hairs prickled on the back of his neck and he pulled away. Tried to pull away. But the dwarf's hand stayed on his head.

"Take my new novel, for instance. It's about an epidemic that's going to sweep the nation, leaving a bloody trail from one end of this country to the other, to wash away all of your sins. At first the police may call it

murder. But the experts will recognize it as suicide, a form of *hara-kiri*, to be precise, which is what it is. I know, because I've made a careful study of the methods. Perfect!"

The underdeveloped features, the cretinous grin filled Victor with sudden loathing, and a terrible fear he could not name touched his scalp. He sat back, pulling father away from the little man.

But the dwarf followed him back, stepping onto the table, one hand still pressing Victor in a grotesque benediction. The lamp glared behind his oversized head, his eyes sparkling maniacally. He rose up and up, unbending his legs, knocking over the bottles, standing taller until he blocked out everything else.

Victor braced against the table and kicked away, but the dwarf leaped onto his shoulders and rode him down. Victor reached out, found the bottle opener and swung it wildly.

"No," he screamed, "my God, no! You're wrong! It's a lie! You're . . . !"

He felt the point of the church key hook into something thick and cold and began to rip.

But too late. A malformed hand dug into his hair and forced his head back, exposing his throat and chest.

"How does *this* feel, Vic? I have to know! Tell my readers!" The other claw darted into the briefcase and dragged forth a blade as long as a bayonet, its edge crusted and sticky but still razor-sharp. "How about this?" cried the dwarf. "And this?"

As Victor raised his hands to cover his throat, he felt the first thrust directly below the rib cage, an almost painless impact, as though he had been struck by a fist in the chest, followed by the long, sawing cut through his vital organs and then the warm pumping of his life's blood down the short sword between them. His fingers tingled and went numb as his hands were wrapped into position around the handle. The ceiling grew bright and the world spun, hurling him free.

"Tell me!" demanded the dwarf.

A great whispering chorus was released within Victor at last, rushing out and rising like a tide to flood the earth, crimson as the rays of a hellishly blazing sun.

But his mouth was choked with his own blood and he could not speak, not a word of it. The vestiges of a final smile moved his glistening lips.

"Tell me!" shrieked the dwarf, digging deeper, while the room turned red. "I must find the perfect method! *Tell me!*"

THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES

XIV



To Dave Carson

*... and there are certain persons—artists twisted and corroded by their  
genius—of whom it truly may be said: Here is one who would rather  
blow out a candle than curse the light.*

*—Kent Allard*

*The Futility of Awareness*





## INTRODUCTION

### Nurturing Nightmares

WELCOME TO *The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series XIV*.

For some of you this may be your first look at the series; some of you have been readers since the first. A complete set of all fourteen DAW Books editions will fill about nine inches of your shelf and furnish you with enough concentrated shivers to push 10 on the Richter scale. It will also provide an outstanding cross section of the best in horror short fiction over the past fifteen years.

But here, however, you have the best horror stories from the past year—the pick of several hundred of stories published here and abroad during 1985. As always, I have attempted to select these with regard only to overall excellence. There are no taboos, no obligatory Big Names, no restrictions as to any particular type, theme or sub-genre of horror fiction. These are the nineteen stories from 1985 that best succeeded in creating a moment of fear—whether at intellectual or at gut level.

I think you will be intrigued by this year's blend: seventeen short stories, a novelette, and a novella. There are the familiar names as well as new ones—for more than half of the writers here, this is their first appearance in *The Year's Best Horror Stories*. Twelve of the writers are American, six are British, and one is Canadian. A bit over half of the selections are from small press sources, the rest from newsstand magazines or anthologies. In technique, these stories range from the traditional to the experimental, from creepy-crawly nasties to psychological terrors. Some embody a macabre sense of humor, others may pull at your heart—and some may tear it right out. In arranging my notes, I realized that three of the authors here are widely published poets, their prose techniques are dissimilar, yet each story is touched by fire.

The stories here represent the best of horror fiction at the midpoint of the 1980s. I was somewhat surprised to note that only two of these nineteen writers were born before World War II. Such selection was certainly not intentional, and I suspect it represents the renewed energy

that has marked the horror genre over the past decade or so. It's interesting that both of the pre-War-generation writers have turned to horror fiction only in recent years.

In the early years of the pulps, science fiction writers began their careers after having been influenced by The Classics—meaning Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, or perhaps that American newcomer, Edgar Rice Burroughs. Horror writers of that day looked back to Edgar Allan Poe as The Master, and a later generation was inspired by H. P. Lovecraft or M. R. James. Just as today's science fiction writers march to different drums, the new generation of horror writers has been inspired by a later hierarchy of classics. Several of the authors here have mentioned the names of others of the authors in *The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series XIV* as representing particular influences or inspirations for their own writing. We seem to propagate like vampires.

A dozen years ago your editor attended the First World Fantasy Convention and was on a panel entitled "New Voices in Fantasy." Other panel members were such unknown newcomers as Ramsey Campbell, Charles L. Grant, and David Drake. I suppose some will now consider us to be The Old Guard.

Or soon will. The horror genre is vital, changing—and constantly attracting new writers with new ideas and new techniques.

Maybe you're one of them.

How's that bite on your neck.

—Karl Edward Wagner

## Penny Daye

Charles L. Grant

*The recent boom in horror fiction spawned a host of thirty-day wonders and a legion of instantly forgettable books. The best that can be said of the boom is that it also delivered from obscurity a number of outstanding horror writers whose talents hitherto had been stuffed beneath a bushel basket. I'm certain that Charles L. Grant would have continued to write superior horror fiction until they found him frozen over his typewriter in some unheated garret. Poetic, no doubt—but nicer to see excellence recognized.*

*Born in New Jersey in 1942, Grant began writing successfully in the late 1960s, and since 1975 he has been able to devote full time to this career. To date he has written or edited some forty books, in addition to another twenty or so under various pseudonyms. Grant was Guest of Honour at Fantasycon IX and then Master of Ceremonies at Fantasycon X—England's predecessor to the World Fantasy Convention. "Penny Daye" was written for the Fantasycon X Programme Booklet and reflects Grant's affection for England—and his finely tuned awareness of the darker side of existence.*

I WAS WELL ON my way to being drunk when I first saw Penny Daye, and there have been moments since when I think that perhaps I should have finished the journey. It would not have spared me grief, and it would not have brought me absent luck, but had I done so, I am almost sure I would not have seen the stones, or the Plain, and I would not have heard the wind and the voices it carries.

Almost.

Not quite.

Though I had a number of what I had thought at the time were perfectly good excuses for that onset of inebriation, there were no real reasons were honesty forced upon me. That I was alone, and in a strange country, low on funds and lower still on spirit, should not by themselves have tempted me into the Salisbury pub; but in concert with an afternoon

more gray than light, more winter than fall, I was an easy prey for self-induced depression, easier prey still for the dark bitter stout that was my substitution for lunch.

I suppose I didn't make a very good impression on my English cousins that afternoon, but I rationalized it by reminding myself that I was actually a Scot and therefore need not apologize for any discomfort I caused the oppressors.

That I was American born and bred made no difference to my by then somewhat befuddled mind; that day I was a Scot, and made my silent toast across the water.

It was well over an hour, I think, before I finally realized that if I didn't move soon, if I didn't get some fresh air and something solid in my stomach, I'd probably have to be carried to my train. The potential embarrassment stirred me, ancestral pride be damned, and I paid my bill and did my best not to stagger outside.

The air was damp, too chilled by the wind for my light jacket and sweater, and I decided to head directly back to the station and punish my stupidity by sitting on a hard and cold British Rail bench, fully exposed to the elements while I waited for transport back to London.

I didn't, however, have all that far to go.

The pub was just around the corner and down a gentle slope from my destination, and as I made my way upward, stifling a few belches and grimacing at the sour aftertaste, I decided there had to be something hitched to my fate that was preventing me from seeing Stonehenge, only a few miles away. This was the second time I had made the journey, and the second time circumstance had prevented me from completing the not-very-long trip out to the stones.

The first occasion was just over a year ago, when I was here with a companion who, on my more charitable days, I might have called my fiancée. She was not, if the truth be known, all that interested in places of possible human sacrifice if she couldn't at least see a bit of dried blood, and she talked me at the last into a sidetrip to what she called a quaint, authentic market in the centre of town, near the cathedral, where most of our allotted funds for the day were spent, and soon forgotten. We barely did make the last train.

She is long gone now, coping in California with a budding screenwriter, and though I had kidded myself about actually wanting to visit the ruins this time, I think it was merely one more way to flay myself for losing her, and to hate myself for not having the courage to do anything about it.

Slowly then, with hands deep in my trouser pockets, I made my way

morosely to the red-brick stationhouse, found the right track, and sat down.

And saw her.

She was on the platform opposite, silently standing apart from a group of young people in varying shades of leather, and those whose hair had been dyed several unnatural but undeniably attractive colours. They were singing boisterously. She was holding her hands in front of her, ignoring them and staring at me.

At least, I thought she was staring at me.

Her coat was camel's hair, her scarf burgundy, her hat a black tam prettily cocked on deep black hair. Though I leaned forward a bit and stared, I could not quite make out her features; it was as if the area had recently been swept through by a faint, disorienting fog. But I knew she was lovely, could see her well enough to make out the pinches of red at her full round cheeks.

It was the drink that made me bold enough to smile.

It must have been the drink that made me think she smiled back and nodded.

Then one of those high-speed monsters blasted through the station, scattering dust and scraps of paper and forcing my eyes closed. The noise one of those trains makes is not unlike the prolonged clap of the sound barrier being shattered, and when it was gone and my eyes were open again, the place where she stood was empty.

I got to my feet at once and moved towards the tracks.

The kids were still there, but she was gone.

I turned then toward the stairs, thinking rather hopefully that she had been attracted to me and had decided to join me, shaking my head at the conceited notion, yet straightening myself up all the same.

She didn't come.

And had not my own train arrived at just that moment, I think I would have gone in search of her. But there were meetings in the city I had to attend, business partners to appease for my recent lack of success, and ruffled feathers to be oiled down with flagrant promises and white lies.

I needn't have worried.

I saw her again, one month later.

It was one week from the end of my trip, and I didn't want to go back. I had seen enough of London, enough of the country, to realize that the legendary British reserve was no more a fact than the so-called cold indifference of New Yorkers. My business, if not my self-esteem, had been temporarily salvaged, my interest in history reawakened simply by walking through so much of it so well preserved, and I was, at the last,

almost calling it home, even to the point of feeling disgusted whenever I saw American tourists making boors of themselves.

I was no longer a tourist, you see; I was fitting in, and I liked it.

So I decided that I would, by god and damn the torpedoes, get back to Salisbury and see those damned stones.

So I took the train, walked down the hill and decided to have a pint to warm me up before catching the bus.

Which I did, though it was more than one, and though it took me near to an hour before I started out again.

And thus I was encased in a mellow, autumnal glow when I caught the bus, sat on the upper deck on the bench seat in front, and watched the town and countryside lurch past me as we headed for Salisbury Plain. I dozed a little; the bus's interior was quite warm. I listened to an elderly woman chiding her husband for forgetting something at the market; her voice was strident, and we were the only ones up there. And I began to think that perhaps I wouldn't go home after all. To be honest, there wasn't much there for me to go back to—an apartment, an office, the infrequent evening excursion to dinner and to bed.

It all seemed, suddenly, awfully bleak and weary.

Then the bus ground gears over the crest of a low hill, and I leaned forward in my front seat, and saw them.

My first reaction was one of disappointment. In the movies, and on the postcards, the monoliths appeared to be hundreds of feet high; they weren't. And the circle they described was considerably smaller than I had imagined. But as the roadway dipped and we approached the turnoff to the parking lot on our right, I felt it. Even on the clattering, fume-filled bus I felt it quite strongly—a sense of age, a sense of melancholy, and I swear that a chill momentarily prickled along my arms.

I couldn't wait to get off, and did so immediately the bus pulled over. There were a number of tourist coaches filling, and several cars pulling out. The ringstones were on the other side of the highway, and one had to purchase a ticket here, then walk through a tunnel under the road, to a ramp that led up to the monuments themselves.

I stared dumbly at the ticket window.

"Closed?" I said. "How the hell can Stonehenge be closed, for god's sake?"

The woman behind the glass smiled sadly and shrugged. Rules, she told me, were rules, and she couldn't let me pass.

I turned my gaze from her to the tunnel, back again and sighed. The return bus to Salisbury was already gone, and another wouldn't be along for well over an hour. Still, I told myself sternly, you're here and you

might as well make the best of it, don't you think? So I walked up to the verge and looked over the other side.

They were there, lying, tilting, standing, a worn path in a great arc around them, a rope-fence to keep the souvenir hunters from taking their chips and gouges.

I felt it again—age, and melancholy, and the wind that danced continuously over the Plain, rounding the ringstones' edges and flattening the low grass, putting voices in my ears that I could not understand.

I imagine I made a rather forlorn picture, because a few minutes later a stout puffing man in a smart dark uniform and round cap came up beside me. He was much shorter than I, his face red and creased, and without a word he handed me a fat silver flask.

"Pity," he said, instinctively knowing my position. "It's best to come here alone, too. You come in a group, there's all chattering and questions and you can't get a true feel for what you see, if you know what I mean."

I nodded.

We introduced ourselves then, after another round of something that had no relation to brandy, but had the fire just the same. His name was Peter Jones, and he was a guide for the helpless who didn't know what they were looking at.

We talked, and we sipped, and we stared at the circle until, as the sky darkened and a fleet of black clouds massed on the horizon, he took my arm. I frowned. He winked and said that we can't have reporters all the way from America losing out on this last chance, now can we? I grinned, then, and followed him, down the incline, past the ticket booth and through the tunnel. No one stopped us, though someone who might have been his boss gave him a dark, disgusted look.

By the time we climbed up the other side, we were alone.

"Do you want the lecture, John Dalton?" he asked.

I shook my head. He had spoken in a reverential whisper, and I knew why—this place, far larger, far more grand than the space it occupied, was more like a cathedral than any cathedral I'd ever been to. If I were so inclined, I would have said that the forces which had created it, and sustained it, were still hard at work in preservation, and perhaps preparation.

I shivered.

Peter nodded and passed me the flask.

We made the circuit, all the way around to the ragged, aslant Heel Stone, and I was trying to imagine what the circle must have been like with all its pieces intact and standing, when I saw her.

The woman from Salisbury station.



She was in the middle of the monument, wearing the same clothes, sitting on one of the fallen blocks.

I grabbed Peter's arm and pointed. He looked, lifted his shoulders against the wind, and pulled me back off the path before handing me the flask. By this time I was more warm inside than out, and my mind had a tendency to wander into places where I knew I didn't belong. But I did see her. I wasn't so drunk that I was imagining it. I knew she was there.

Especially when Peter said, "She's dead, you know."

"Is she?" I asked calmly, and didn't object when he pulled me down onto the ground, where we sat cross-legged, watching that beautiful woman watching us. She was framed now between two of the larger, linteled pieces, and there was nothing behind her but the circle and the sky. We heard no cars, no buses, no planes passed overhead. "Is she really?"

"Indeed." He looked at me sideways. "You're not afraid?"

I shrugged. "I don't think so."

"Good man. There are those I know who tend to feel a little threatened when they see her. Mind, she's never done anyone, but it is a bit unsettling, you've got to give it that."

It was.

And what was worse—I felt a dim part of me shrieking with laughter because here I was, sitting on dead grass with a dead-drunk guide, staring at a dead woman and believing every word.

"A shame," I said.

"It is that."

"What killed her?"

"Oh, the stones."

"What happened? One of them fall?"

We passed the flask.

"No, nothing like that, John, nothing at all. She came here one day in winter . . . oh, a few years back it was. All alone. Sat right where she's sitting now and froze to death."

"That doesn't make any sense. Surely someone would have seen her. You, maybe, or one of the others."

Jones shook his head. "No one. Not until the next morning. It was snowing, you see, and with the fences, the road closed, no one saw her until dawn. A motorist. He called the constables in Amesbury and they came out to fetch her. Too late, of course. Frozen stiff, and make no mistake about it."

She was beautiful. I still couldn't see her features clearly for the wind blowing in my eyes, but she was beautiful.

"Suicide," I guessed.

"No. The stones."

"You said that already."

"So I did. Well, I'll say it a third time—it was the stones that did it."

"She tried to take a piece of them?"

He scoffed, and we shared the last of the drink before he pointed to someone's name spray-painted on one of the monoliths' faces. "What are you thinking, man, the stones were protecting themselves? Then why didn't they take care of the little bugger what did that?"

I didn't know.

I belched.

"Cute little darling, isn't she," he said.

"I think I'm in love."

"Oh, yes, you might be. You might be at that."

"You think so?"

He nudged me with an elbow, gave me a wink. "Why don't you introduce yourself?" And he giggled.

"We've already met. Sort of."

"Really, now. You don't say. Where?"

"At the station. The train station in Salisbury. I saw her on the platform, and she smiled at me."

Peter sighed with delight. "Ah, so she's getting around at last. It's nice. I'd hate to think of her being stuck out here all the time."

A sudden gust nearly shoved me over, and my head cleared for an instant. "Jesus," I said, "we're talking about a damned ghost!"

"Penny Daye," he replied.

"What?"

"Penny Daye. That's her name. You should at least know her name if you're going to make remarks."

I scrambled unsteadily to my feet and stood over him.

"Peter, sober up, for god's sake." I passed a hand over my eyes, took a deep breath, and looked again.

She was still there.

Smiling at me.

"Jesus," I whispered.

Peter hiccupped.

I wanted to clout him over the head then, kick at him, force him to admit that he was playing a marvelous, and certainly well-executed, joke on me. But he only burst into cackling laughter and rolled onto his back, his cap spinning away in the wind, the flask bouncing free on the grass.

I waved at him disgustedly and started for the circle, watching the woman as her smile broadened and she adjusted her coat primly over

her knees. When I reached the restraining rope, I stepped over it, barely thinking that I might be laying myself open for a hell of a big fine, and ignored Peter's sudden shout of warning.

For which of us, I didn't know.

She winked, and one hand lifted to rest against her cheek, an invitation to dance if I ever saw one.

Peter yelled again as I passed under the lintel.

I turned and grinned at him, swayed when the wind touched me, swayed again when it stopped.

And when I turned back, she was gone.

I nearly fell in my haste to get to where she'd been sitting, and did fall once I reached it, by snaring my foot in a depression hidden in tangled grass. My hands flew out to catch me, and I still came up against the stone hard with my chest, momentarily knocking the air from my lungs. My eyes teared, my ribs protested, and it was several gasping minutes before I was able to straighten up and look around.

She was gone.

So was Peter.

And suddenly I was too tired to chase after either one of them.

Too many drinks, too many years, too many disappointments of which this had to be the last straw.

At that moment there was a rage I didn't think I had in me, and I didn't care if anyone saw what I was doing; I hoisted myself up and sat there, ankles crossed, hands in my lap, looking out over the Plain and listening to the wind, watching the light vanish, watching the shadows grow out of the stones.

And hearing the aged voices that cling to the air, filled with angry tears and angry questions I have seen myself shed and heard myself ask whenever I turn on my light and there's no one home but me.

I think there's a hint of snow in the air.

Voices in false melancholy, telling me now as they have told Penny Daye and all the others before her that if I could do to the world what I believed the world had done to me, I will not have to stay long.

All I need is one person. One woman. Perhaps finding her on the bus, or at the station, or on a corner. One woman to smile at, one woman who knows what it's like to be alone.

*He's dead, you know, Peter will say.*

A woman to love me fleetingly, to cherish me briefly, dream of me just once in a large empty bed.

*Froze to death, right where he's sitting.*

To lure to my side because that's all there is left.

*The stones did it.*

It made me smile, as it had made her smile before she brought me to the place where the stones held me fast.

*The stones.*

It brought a color to my cheeks I haven't had since I was a child, a color I would take with me, as she had, to find me.

It's the color of the weak and the meek and those who suffer for romance, because romance has no heart.

It's Penny Daye's color.

It's the color of revenge.



## Dwindling

David B. Silva

*David B. Silva is editor/publisher of The Horror Show, a quarterly magazine and one of the most promising small-press publications of recent years. Often when a small-press editor also has ambitions as a writer, the temptation to publish his own work is irresistible and the results almost certainly unfortunate. Not so for Silva, who has avoided this trap and chosen instead to publish his stories elsewhere—and with considerable success—in a number of small-press magazines (“Dwindling” is from Spectrum Stories) and in anthologies such as Masques, Cold Sweats, and Damnations. Born July 11, 1950 in Carmel, California, Silva now lives in Oak Run, California—dividing his time about 75-25 between The Horror Show and his own fiction. Silva has been writing for about five years now, and he has a novel due out from Leisure Books.*

IN THE SUMMER, just after school let out, the pastures were still green and there was a freshness in the air that wouldn't die until the raw August temperatures broiled it from memory. The wind was tender and breezy then. During the day, the sky was a faint blue. But near sundown it would open its throat and the blue would turn purple, thick and rich and friendly. It had always been a special time of year for Derrick.

As he scooted off the last bus, making its last stop of the school year, and gazed across the forever fields to the farmhouse, a vague and chilling premonition marched in gooseflesh up his arms. The sensation was too obscure to trouble him. But as he kicked stones at his younger brothers and slowly made his way home, he made note of the bitter feeling and how similar it tasted to the bitterness he had experienced the day before Grandma Sanders had died. Then Georgie hit him in the back with a dirt clod and the feeling was put aside.

Six-year-old Tammy folded her hands in front of her, bowed her head,

and took a deep breath. "Thank you, Lord, for this food upon our table. Amen."

"Amen," said in chorus, then hands, small-medium-large, reached for corn on the cob and broth of chicken and fresh green salad made of lettuce and tomato, bell pepper and carrot, celery and onion. There was hot homemade bread and cold unpasteurized milk. Everything and everyone that was important in Derrick's life was all right there. Except for . . .

"Where's Sarah?" he asked as he buttered a slice of bread that warmed the palm of his hand. And when no one answered, he asked again, "Where's Sarah?" this time looking directly at his mother. Her eyes seemed tired, as if she were gone somewhere faraway in a daydream. A swirl of black hair, singed with lean flames of gray, fell across her forehead. She brushed it back, seeming never to have left the daydream. "Mom?"

"Hmm?" she said, only half-there.

"I asked where Sarah was?"

"Who?"

"Sarah."

For a moment, there was an eerie pause in the meal. Forks stalled in mid-air. Mouths were closed, ears were opened, and a dozen questioning eyes turned to stare at him. *Who's Sarah?*

Then Tammy grinned, and with her mouth full of thick, cheesy casserole, she said, "Betcha Derr's got a girlfriend."

Derrick felt himself blushing then, even though he had nothing at all to blush about. He was just curious about Sarah, that's all. No big deal. He was sure she was all right, someone would have told him if she weren't. So he smiled uncomfortably and turned back to his plate of vegetables, doing his best to divert the attention away from him.

His thoughts about Sarah would just have to wait.

Derrick didn't breathe another word of her until he was in bed that night. Brian was already asleep in the corner, one of his arms hanging off the edge of the bed, his hand brushing against the floor. Georgie was tossing in the bottom bunk, rocking himself back and forth as he did every night until he eventually fell asleep. From the upper bunk, Derrick whispered, "Georgie?"

"What?" The light sway of the bunk beds stopped.

"Where's Sarah?"

The rocking started up again.

"Georgie?"

"I don't know."

Derrick leaned over the edge of his bed. "If you don't stop that blessed rocking, I'm gonna slug you."

"I don't even know who she is," his brother whispered.

And for a moment, Derrick couldn't believe his ears. "She's your sister," he said. "Your sister! The one that tried to eat the tail right off your kite yesterday."

"That was Tammy," his brother quietly said before he rolled over, face to the wall, back to Derrick where he could see a luminescent iron-on patch of the Incredible Hulk glowing green in the dark. "Ain't one pesky sister bad enough for you?"

Derrick could have argued. He could have pointed out a handful of recent incidents when little Sarah had pestered both of them. Little sisters did things like that. And eventually he could have made Georgie admit that Sarah was missing. But he didn't. Somewhere inside, gnawing at his gut, Derrick knew that there had never been a Sarah, that her four years of giggling and gurgling and crying—sometimes all night long—had been little more than an imaginative spasm, a bizarre tic on the face of his reality. And that's why they had all stared at him with eyes that asked, *Who's Sarah?* Because there was no Sarah. His imagination had been playing games in his head, as it must do with everyone, as it did when Tammy played tea party with playmates that weren't really there.

An imaginative spasm.

That's what it was.

The summer's first one-hundred-degree temperature arrived less than a week later, pushing the mercury above the red zone on the rusting Orange Crush thermometer that had been tacked to the big oak as long as Derrick could remember.

Pa had allowed them the day down at Miner's Pond. Clad in cut-offs made from an old pair of jeans he'd worn out during the winter, Derrick was busy cleaning the spring weeds out of the little patch of sand which covered the ground between the water and the cliff of rock they used as a diving platform. The others were already in the water, squirming and churning enough to make the pond look like a pot of boiling watercress soup.

Tammy let out a squeal just before Brian dunked her.

Sometimes, like now, when her hair was damp and it closely embraced her thin, almost-hollow cheeks, he would see Sarah looking out from Tammy's laughing eyes. Even though he realized that there had never been a Sarah. And when he remembered those special things she would



do, those special things his imagination had made so real for him—like the time she tried to cut her own hair and Ma nearly had to shave her head to make it all even again—after times like those, he wished she had been more than just a daydream.

But she hadn't. He knew that now. She was gone, her dolls were gone, her clothes were gone. There had never been a real Sarah.

Derrick collapsed into the soft sand and sifted his strange emptiness from hand to hand in the form of a thousand gritty particles.

"Come on, Derr," one of the others called.

He smiled and shook his head, all of a sudden feeling too old to be splashing carelessly in Miner's Pond. And he felt a little sad just then, as if at age twelve he had suddenly realized that the time was nearing when he would have to give up some of those cherished things that stood between being a boy and being a man. Perhaps the joy of Miner's Pond. Perhaps some other never-to-be-forgotten place or time or person.

That's what his parents had done. Over the years, they had somehow given up their happiness for something else, something he wasn't sure he understood. And maybe that was what growing up was all about. Giving away those things you liked most about yourself.

If so, it didn't seem fair.

"Derr, come on!"

It didn't seem fair at all.

Derrick wiped sand from the butt of his cut-offs, and with a laughter he wasn't yet ready to give up, he did a painful belly flop into the circle of his brothers and sister.

It felt great.

They played away the afternoon, exploring creek rocks for crawdads, building a miniature dam to house minnows, diving off the cliff, playing tag up and down the creek's banks until their feet were sore and their bodies were bright pink from too much sun.

It was getting time to head back home again.

Derrick had gathered up the towels they had brought along, and the lunch bags which Ma would want returned for recycling. The others were down the creek a ways. He could hear their laughter whistling through the pawlike leaves of the oak trees.

"Gotta go!" he yelled as he shook the sand out of the towels. He liked being big brother, the one they looked up to and depended upon. Sometimes, he felt more like their father than their brother.

"Let's go!" he called again.

The boys came bursting through the bushes. Brian collapsed in the sand. "Beat ya," he said, lying flat on his back.

"Did not," Georgie cried. His arms were braced on his legs as he collected a breath. His eyes kept looking to Brian, as if he knew he had been beaten and wondered if his younger brother might make too big a deal out of it.

"Where's Tammy?" Derrick asked. "Pa's gonna be real upset if we don't get ourselves back by supper time."

Brian dragged himself to his feet. "I beat ya," he said again, pushing Georgie up the side of the short bank. When they had made it to the top, they stopped and turned back to their older brother. "Thought you were in a hurry." Brian said.

"What about Tammy?"

Then there was a short pause that seemed to last forever, and his brothers exchanged a curious glance. Then a chill wound up Derrick's spine as he recognized their bewilderment. He didn't inquire a third time. The story was still fresh in his mind. *Who's Tammy?* Just another spasm, that's all. No need to ask further, just fill in the blanks. *There is no Tammy. There never has been. She was just a product of the same game, the same hiccup of imagination that birthed Sarah. And now they were both gone.* An imaginative quirk, that's all it was.

"Derr, it's getting late."

He glanced up at the voice and wondered, almost casually, if the two boys who had been his brothers for almost every minute of his life, if they too, were mere quirks. The thought scared him.

"Derr . . ."

"Yeah," he said, flipping the towels over his shoulders. "Coming."

Tammy never returned. He knew she wouldn't. And like his parents and his brothers, he never asked about her.

That night, Brian went off to sleep in his own room, the room that Derrick's imagination had lent to Sarah and Tammy. It seemed lonelier without Brian sleeping in the corner, without his arm hung over the edge of the bed, brushing a hand against the floor. At least he still felt the comfort of Georgie's rocking, the comfort of the bunk bed swaying back and forth as it had always done as long as he could remember. At least that hadn't been taken from him.

Summertime lost its magic after that. The days became too hot, Miner's Pond too cold. The beautiful yellows and greens around the farm shriveled, becoming deathly browns. The laughter that had so often

swept around the dinner table, became a whisper, a cough of its past joy. Everything changed, and somewhere along the line, memories of yesterdays gradually became more and more difficult to call up again, as if pieces of his life were somehow being consumed. The magic of summertime had been lost and everything was suddenly different.

Even his parents seemed somehow different, somehow changed. He wasn't sure exactly what the difference was, and wondered if perhaps it was merely his imagination at play again.

"Remember before?" Derrick heard his mother ask his father one night. They were outside on the front porch, casually gliding back and forth on the porch swing, allowing themselves to be overheard by the evening stars and by Derrick himself. He was upstairs in the attic, poking through old boxes of toys, searching for a game of Cootie which he hadn't seen in years. Just a bored-night impulse, that was the only reason he was there.

"Before what?" Pa said.

The arthritic squeaking of metal to rusting metal filled the moment of silence and drew Derrick curiously closer to the window.

"Before we got married," she said. "Remember how we used to walk along Dogwood Creek at night and the breeze would rustle through the trees, sounding like God himself was trying to talk to us? And how we always knew we'd get married and live out the rest of our lives together? How it was never gonna change?"

Pa chuckled. "I remember."

"I miss those times," she told him.

"Guess I do, as well."

"They were *good* times."

"The best," his Pa agreed.

"I want to go back." The rhythmic squeaking paused for a breath, then started up again. I want it to be like it was then, without the worries and the fears, without the kids and the farm to look after."

Pa didn't say so much as "Hmm."

"Mind ya, I'm not unhappy," she said. "But it's all slipping by so quickly. I want to do it all again. I want to court and marry and make babies all over again, like it was the first time."

"Been feeling this way all summer, have you?"

Derrick couldn't see them on the porch, they were sitting almost right underneath him, but he imagined her nodding her head. He stepped back from the window, suddenly feeling a strange sense of shame from his eavesdropping, realizing his ears had crossed the path of something they were never meant to hear. But they *had* heard, and Ma *had* been different

all summer. Perhaps that was the only trick of his imagination that hadn't really been a trick. She *had* been different. The whole summer had been different.

He left the attic without ever finding the game of Cootie.

Brian blinked out of his life two days later. Derrick woke up to find the bottom bunk empty and when he went searching for Georgie, he found the ten-year-old in Brian's room where Brian should have been, rocking Brian's bed the way he used to rock the bunk beds.

"What are you doing in here?" he asked. "Where's Brian?"

Through sleepy eyes, Georgie expressed his puzzlement, that same puzzlement that had surfaced after each of Derrick's summer-long inquiries, after each loss that had seemingly slipped away unnoticed. And Derrick knew, he knew and he understood and he felt the emptiness devour another portion of his life. Georgie was all he had left, and what would happen after his last brother slipped away?

What would happen then?

It was early August all too soon. The fields were dry and dusty. Miner's Pond had dipped so low that a soul couldn't dive off the cliffs without meeting the bottom head first. His mom was looking different by the day. His father was too. Like the summer hadn't withered them like everything else it touched. Like they thrived somehow on the heat and the dirt and the peace that had shadowed the farm. That's what it was—peace. Too much for Derrick's liking. The meals were too quiet, the days too empty.

He stayed close to Georgie whenever he could, whenever he wasn't off tending to chores or running errands or sleeping in his own bed, a wall away from his little brother. But it happened just the same.

He woke up one morning and he was the last, all his brothers and all his sisters were finally gone. He was all that remained. And he imagined his parents breathing a heavy sigh, relieved that at last the inevitable moment was near, the moment when their oldest child would finally slip away like the others.

There were days now, unlike past summers, when he wished he had never been the oldest, the last to go. How much easier it would have been to have simply slipped away like Sarah, right at the beginning, never having to watch as the others were taken one by one, never having to feel each loss. How much easier.

Each day thereafter painfully dwindled away, seconds feeling like minutes, minutes like hours, until his leave-taking finally arrived. It was nine-thirty. The sky was black on a moonless night. The window was open, inviting the slight breeze inside to chase away the godawful heat.

It was like a thousand other summer nights, yet unlike any that had come his way before. From the top bunk, with his arms folded behind his neck, he gazed out the window to the darkness of the universe and wondered where it ended, wondered if he would float out there after . . .

. . . as he sometimes did in his dreams.

“Derr?” A shaft of hall light sectioned his darkness, and his mother’s silhouette filled the doorway. “How you doing?”

“Okay.” He didn’t want to look at her, kept his watch on the universe instead. It would be easier that way. But she crept into the darkness, right up next to his bed, and she stood over him, a shaft of light falling across her face. It was the first time, as he forced himself to look at her, that he realized just how she had changed over the summer.

“is it too hot for you?”

The singe of gray that had danced like a wind-blown scarf through her hair was no longer there.

“I’m comfortable.”

And her eyes had come alive again, they had a sparkle in them that he hadn’t noticed in years.

“You sure?” She brushed the hair away from his forehead, then held his hand in hers. “You know I love you,” she said.

Derrick glanced out the bedroom window at the watching universe. He wanted to tell her he still loved her, but knew he wouldn’t be able to find a way to say the words.

“Remember that,” she said. “Remember I love you.” Then all too quickly, she turned and started out of the room.

“Ma,” he said, still moving away. “Are you sorry I’m your son? Are you and Pa sorry you ever had me?”

She paused, a wisp of shadow in the doorway. “Of course not. You’re our son, our flesh and blood. You’re a part of us. We’ll always love you.”

“Even if I have to go away?”

Her eyes were hidden in a checkerboard pattern of black and white, but the long silence answered his question for her. And he knew then that she didn’t even understand what she had done, that it had all been done out of innocence, out of an ignorance of the consequences of her wishing. *I want to court and marry and make babies all over again, like it was the first time.*

“I still love you, Ma,” he told her. “Even if I have to go away.”

“There’s nowhere to go,” she said. “Nowhere at all.”

The bedroom door closed.

Darkness rushed in through the open window.

Derrick rolled over, rolled away from his doorway to the windowed

universe, until he was nestled safely in the wings of his blankets. Then a single tear tumbled down his cheek, a tear not for himself, but for his mother.



## Dead Men's Fingers

Phillip C. Heath

*Born in Austin, Texas in 1953, Phillip C. Heath moved about the country a bit until the lure of the Lone Star State brought him back again. Currently he works as a real estate representative for a large corporation in Dallas. By his own confession, Heath has "a soft spot for the Gothic or Victorian style"—a fondness that has probably relegated his work to the pages of small-press publications where they don't attract the notice his stories deserve. Heath is a careful craftsman, with a deft touch for conjuring forth an icy atmosphere of fear. A pity that major horror markets demand trendy, as opposed to traditional, fiction. Nonetheless, Heath has established a reputation in the small press, with appearances in Whispers, Fantasy Tales, Damnations, Gothic, The Horror Show, and elsewhere. His stories have also been anthologized in The Year's Best Fantasy Stories, The Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories, The Fontana Book of Great Horror Stories, and Nightmares. "Dead Men's Fingers" is from the new Canadian fantasy magazine, Borderland.*

*So is the great and wide sea also; wherein are things  
creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts.  
There to the ships, and there is that Leviathan;  
whom thou hast made to take his pastime therein.  
These wait all upon thee; that thou mayest give them  
meat in due season.  
—The Book of Common Prayer*

"SAIL HOOOO!"

All eyes were abruptly averted upward.

"Where away?" someone bellowed.

The lookout, seated precariously on his perch in the crosstrees a hundred feet above the rolling sea, pointed one hand to the horizon, cupping his mouth with the other. "A barque by the look of 'er," he sang out, "'ull down about four points forward the starb'rd beam!"



The British whaleship, *Jezebel*, came alive. Every man on board forsook his various chores and rushed anxiously to the bulwarks to gaze out over the deep, blue expanse of water. The first mate promptly informed his superior, Captain Seabury, who emerged from his cabin to join his crew topside. Adjusting a brass spyglass to his eye, he summarily gave the order to alter course, and soon the English frigate was tacking toward the small speck on the skyline roughly three leagues distant.

Undoubtedly a single, similar pattern of thought played through the minds of the mariners who watched as they steadily closed the distance between the two vessels. It had thus far been a rather disheartening voyage: from London across the Atlantic—by now virtually depleted of the sperm—was a long and tiresome journey in itself. Southward, the once bountiful Brazil grounds offered few sightings and little encouragement. On past the chill, barren Falkland Islands, they struggled around Cape Horn, the southern tip of South America. Though summer in those latitudes, the ship battled its way through tremendous head seas and skirted frightful fields of Antarctic ice, enduring howling gales for almost three weeks, as nights and days merged into gray sameness. Once having gained the Pacific to the west, they spotted, gave chase and killed two baleen whales near the island of Massafuero, several hundred miles off the coast of Chile, but one of them sank before it could be properly hitched and was lost.

So the men aboard the *Jezebel* understandably were impatient to reap the rewards of their hardship. A whaleman's life was necessarily shaped by loneliness and exhilaration, tedium and terror; always voracious for nature's bounty—if he could persevere to secure it, for he was well aware of how sorely the odds were against him, and in favor of his adversary. Admittedly, last year was a very profitable one for Pacific whaling, yet with scarcely six hundred barrels of oil in the hold no one need be reminded that scores of ships in the past, for whatever reasons, had returned home freighting barely enough cargo to pay expenses. Hence, they were keen to have a customary gam, or visit, with this passing vessel—hopefully a sister whaler—and learn what favorable prospects might lie waiting in the vast and trackless sea ahead.

As the *Jezebel* neared the other ship they saw that it was indeed a whaler, about one hundred feet long, of approximately 370 tons; and although was square-rigged except for the mizzenmast, all but the light sails had been reefed, as if already hove to for the night. Whalers were seldom under way in darkness except when traveling between whaling grounds or trailing a wounded whale—but it was scarcely late afternoon. Closer still, and it was observed that the ship seemed somewhat ne-

glected; the entire hull was encrusted with barnacles, and it looked a bit ragged overall. From the way it rode in the water, listing slightly to starboard, it gave the impression of being either fully laden in bulk or else had sprung a leak. But what was most peculiar—disconcerting, in fact—was that there was absolutely no movement or sign of life on deck. Whereupon someone noticed the pennants flying at three mastheads—a signal for help.

They maneuvered alongside the other ship, identified by the lettering on its stern as the *Reaper*, and lines were thrown across and made fast.

At first the possibility of a plague was debated, and the consequences of close contact between ships. However, the captain theorized this was probably not the case, nevertheless restricting anybody from boarding the vessel unless expressly authorized.

He squinted to the west. "It shall be dark in an hour or so," he mumbled to himself. Then, to the boatswain: "Back the maintop's'l, and proceed to snug her for the night. Mr. Cribb?"

The first mate, a swarthy, broad-shouldered chap, appeared at his side. "Aye, sir?"

"Pick two of the deckies to accompany us," he instructed. "We must board her and investigate ere nightfall takes us."

The others were mustered, and the informal party clambered on board the *Reaper*. The ship was cloaked in an eerie hush. Only a vagrant, light breeze periodically set the shrouds to moaning softly.

Captain Seabury turned to the others. "One of you men have a thorough look-see topside, another search the fo'c's'le; Mr. Cribb, you explore the contents of the hold, and I shall locate the captain's quarters." They nodded and separated accordingly.

Belowdecks, it was even more oppressively deserted than above. The narrow companionway led directly to the captain's cabin, and Captain Seabury descended into a deepening gloom. Once in the cabin he called out to the crowded shadows. "Ahoy! Anyone about?"

There was no answer, save the dull, choppy gurgle of the sea as it washed along the outer hull of the ship. In the semi-darkness he tripped over a chair on his way to the captain's desk, but there found a scrimshaw lantern and lit the candle nub within. Aided by the dim light he eased next into the captain's head, empty, and the captain's stateroom—which was not. On the berth reposed the form of a body, covered completely by a blanket that appeared to be riddled with holes and blotched with dark stains, which he quickly recognized as dried blood. A discharged pistol lay on the floor beside the bed. Something thin and white protruded from the edge of the blanket.

Captain Seabury reached down and jerked off the blanket.

His stomach clenched. It was a human skeleton, still clothed in only a tatter of rags, and one of the hands held a Bible to its chest. A conspicuous hole in the side of the skull indicated a suicide.

Unwilling to tarry, Captain Seabury pushed on to the first and second mates' cabins which were both unoccupied. But in the former he discovered the ship's logbook. This, he knew, should divulge at least some hint as to what had occurred aboard this mystery ship. The book was opened to the final entry, dated just two days ago. He was going to scan it there and then but a sudden noise close by caught his attention, and he wheeled around, listening.

Yet now there was nothing, only continued silence.

Deciding to wait until later to peruse the journal at length, he rummaged the pantry. There he found ample reserves of smoked meat, salt fish, hard-baked rye bread, beans and rice, and other foodstuffs, as well as kegs of cider and grog. No, it was not starvation that had doomed the men of the *Reaper*.

In the steerage the captain discovered a second body sprawled out near the foot of the companionway ladder, this one a skeleton also. A small oil-lamp was shattered beneath it, leaving a lightly charred spot. Evidently the person had been carrying the lamp and stumbled or fallen upon it with his chest, the flame quickly smothering under his weight.

"Captain! Where ye be?" he heard the first mate calling.

Mr. Cribb emerged from the doorway of the blubber room. When he espied Captain Seabury hovering over the skeletal remains, he nodded in acknowledgment. "Aye, I saw it as I came down." Another of the men met them and joined in, pointing a thumb behind him. "I found three of 'is mates in the fo'c's'le—nothing but bones, jest like 'im."

The trio stood speechless a moment, contemplating the macabre figure at their feet. Then Mr. Cribb broke the spell.

"Sir, I been to the hole . . . I think you'd best take a peek."

They followed him down the hatchway into the stinking, stifling hold, black as that of a slave ship. In the wavering shadows they stepped carefully, for the stairs and gangways were more often than not slick with oil and scum and could be hazardous.

The captain lifted his light high, and saw no need for explanation as to Cribb's discovery. The hold was crammed to capacity with whale oil—no less than 2,500 barrels!

The first mate drew his master's attention to the alarming level of water which covered the ballast and almost all of the bottom rows of barrels.

"It's more than bilge water, sir. See how the frames are unusually damp? I believe she's been slowly takin' on water—shipworms, I'd be a-guessin'."

Just then they all heard a distinct scraping, rustling sort of sound, coming from several pools of darkness beyond the candle's feeble, flickering glow.

The third man glanced over his shoulder. "I 'eard quare noises meself," he whispered uneasily, "when I was forwurd."

"And I, too," added Cribb.

The captain frowned but kept his sedate demeanor. "Rats, most likely. Though 'tis odd they have not vacated this part of the ship, considering the seepage." It was a common fact that rats flourished on such vessels, attracted by whale oil and blood. But somehow that reassurance did not put their minds at ease.

Captain Seabury smacked his lips in dismissal. "Well, let us be off. The rest of the crew will begin to wonder for our safety."

Once on deck, the fourth sailor reported to the captain.

"The blokes must 'ave bane tryin'-out a whale, sir; but everythin' seems to be in a bit of a 'urrah's nest, like they just up an' quit. The cuttin' platform is still in place, and the try-pots is full."

"Anything else?"

The man nodded quizzically. "Aye, three of the boats is missin'; the other two 'ave bane deliberately scuttled—aven the spare." It was true; the remaining whaleboats hung from their davits, all rendered useless by a vandal's axe.

Twilight had by now deepened into dusk, a starry but moonless night. Back on board the *Jezebel* Mr. Cribb took Captain Seabury aside for a private conversation. "What do you suppose, sir?—abandoned a slowly sinkin' ship? Mutiny?"

The captain creased his brow in thought. "She's of Yankee origin, probably making for home. But a whole crew suddenly deserting in three whaleboats on the open sea? They wouldst fare a much better chance staying with her till the end, pressing her as far as possible toward the nearest landfall. And mutiny?—why leave a full hold? More yet, what of those sad skeletons? Surely, 'tis a queer business. But perhaps this will furnish the key." He tapped the log.

Cribb seemed restless. "By your leave, sir," he continued, "you know me not to be a hen-hearted man, but somethin' about this gives me the willies. I for one would sleep better this night if that—ship—were cast off and kept at a wide berth. At least until we can puzzle it out."

The captain shook his head slowly and clutched the other's shoulder.

His voice was resolute. "I respect your concern, my friend, but I feel 'tis unwarranted to that extent. I must also respect the best interests of the owners of this vessel, and the sole purpose of our voyage. Begad, man, are you aware of what oil is fetching per ton back in Londontown? Do you not realize the treasure we have yonder? There is a fortune in her hold, and by all the laws of salvage that drifting derelict belongs to me. 'Tis the good hand of Providence."

The first mate was still not satisfied. "But sir, many of the men are superstitious—there will be talk and scuttlebutt. They'll fancy her a Jonah."

The captain began to grow impatient. "Then tell them naught. Set the first dog-watch, and be sure no one gets curious and boards her. At the crack of dawn we start shipping her cargo."

The first mate sighed in resignation. "Aye, Captain, I will see to it."

Captain Seabury watched him go, and relished one last long look at the swarthy, sinister hulk of the *Reaper*. Then he went below.

After a supper of crackerhash, prune pie and tea to wash it down, he met with the other officers to outline plans for the morrow's task of loading the considerable quantity of oil. Shortly before midnight, at seven bells, he returned to his quarters, lit a lamp, and poured himself a tot of run. Filling his pipe, he settled comfortably into a chair and opened the leather-bound book to a place dating nine days prior—where, strangely enough, he noticed, the handwriting changed altogether. The heading at the beginning of these newer entries, written in a refined, precise hand, pronounced at the top:

Ship The *Reaper* of New Bedford.

In the South Pacific Ocean, June, 1846.

Bearings, reckonings and other specifics were noted respectively. The daily accounts, however, were exceptionally long, more than a few pages in length. Then he realized this segment of the journal had actually been backdated, as if to catch up several days' neglected entries.

The *Jezebel* creaked and rocked lazily to the whim of the sea. So there, in the solemn tranquility of his cabin, Captain Seabury started to read.

And a most bizarre tale began to unfold . . .

The weather had held nicely, being fair but very hot. We were homeward bound at last after forty-two arduous months at sea, plowing the deep and farming its green pastures. And it had been a plentiful

harvest indeed, with our hold quite full. Thus the prospect of still one more whale was rather looked upon as a cup running over.

Way into the afternoon the cry was sounded: "There blooows!"—our lookout having glimpsed the familiar ten-to twelve-foot spray of air and moisture from the animal's blowhole, visible for up to six miles.

Without delay the bosun began supervising miscellaneous jobs on the deck, in anticipation of the kill. In jig-time three of the slim whaleboats had been launched into the water, six men to a boat, myself included, and we commenced rowing in the direction of the sighting. The boats were soon scudding across the wavelets, our second mate calling softly, "Spring on your oars, me hearties. Spring hard, I tell you!"

As we approached, he ordered the oars shipped and paddles brought out, which were quieter: for though a whale's vision and smell are poor, its hearing is acute. A flock of petrels skimmed the water in wide circles, eager to peck at whatever marine life might be clinging to the whale's back. Had the beast itself been feeding, or had it been spooked? If feeding, it would reappear in the general vicinity within thirty minutes or so; otherwise, it could swim for ten miles or better before resurfacing for air. Silent and tense with expectancy, we could simply wait and watch, floating like a cork on the immensity of the ocean, the sea and sky vague, warm reflections.

We did not have long to wait. All at once there was a yell from one of the boats, "He breaches!" as the surface erupted hereabout, the whale surging out of the sea in a mighty leap. It white-watered with a deafening sound and again submerged, but not before the mate could make a reasonable guess at how far the animal would travel under water, judging from the way its flukes were turned. It was a fairly sizable sperm, sixty-five feet at least, strangely mottled black and gray in color. He was an old ill-tempered bull, apparently aware of our presence and somewhat agitated as well.

Once more we were pulling on our oars. The harpooner stood at the ready and braced himself against the clumsy cleat, harpoon in hand. It was a six-foot shaft connected to a thirty-inch iron rod, tipped with a razor-edged double-flue barb. During idle periods on ship these fellows incessantly checked their gear, recoiling lines, sharpening and resharpening harpoon and lance points, and the time of their preparation was at hand. The men in the other two boats positioned themselves also.

Suddenly, twenty feet away, there was a tumultuous crash as the whale surfaced squarely beneath the first mate's boat, cleaving it in twain and toppling some of the crew into the frothy, foaming water. Others clung perilously to the wreckage or lay trapped amidst the tangle of

cordage. Then it dipped forward, twice smashing its broad flukes down on the floundering men and flotsam with such force as to splinter the remnants like so much kindling, sending spray into our own boat. There was only one survivor, whom the other boat managed to reach.

The whale, obviously enraged, continued to rampage nearby, as if already in pain or fear. Our companion boat attempted to sink a harpoon—but one of the lines snagged as the thrashing brute moved off a short distance and abruptly sounded, carrying the boat down therewith and drowning all but two of the men, our captain being one of the latter.

When the whale resurfaced we were close by—near enough to immediately put wood to blackskin. The harpoon flashed straight down into the thick blubber and sank clear to its socket. The island of flesh trembled for a moment with shock. Then the harpooner snatched up a second harpoon, this one tied to an inflated bladder which would tire the animal should it try to dive again, and was able to drive it to the hilt right beside the first one. He tossed out a hundred feet of half-inch manilla.

Quickly but carefully the harpooner took over the steering oar while the second mate exchanged positions at the bow. And nary a second too soon, for now the harpoon line was whipping out of the boat. The wounded whale was off, the two harpoons buried in its flesh.

Wrapped around the snubbing post, the line became taut and the prow dipped into the water till there were only a few inches of freeboard. The second mate glanced back apprehensively and shouted, "You look out what you are about! Do not box the boat down too much—you may flip her."

The line whirred faster round the loggerhead until it started to smoke from the friction, so the nearest oarsman dipped water onto it, hatchet handy should it be necessary to cut the rope. Our quarry was running briskly but erratically, dragging us behind it at no less than twelve knots—the Nantucket sleigh ride.

Then, with a certain horror, we realized that the behemoth was bearing down on the *Reaper*. Recollections of oft-told tales went racing through our minds . . . the legendary depredations and malign intelligence of such solitary rogues as Mocha Dick, New Zealand Tom, and Timor Jack. Our ship could, in all likelihood, fall victim to its own prey. And at the present we were helpless.

Our fears began to materialize. The whale was obviously coming foul of the ship, as if to stave in her hull. At the crucial instant of impact, he slowed and swerved, grazing the vessel's keel with the side of its gigantic head and body, and shearing away part of the hull's copper sheathing as he went along and came to leeward. But by the life of us, it appeared the

leviathan had no ill-intent upon the ship as such, but was merely finding some sort of relief in scraping its hide against her broadside.

Yet the danger was in no ways past, for as the whale of a sudden nudged sharply amidships an astonished sailor engrossed in the excitement leaned too far over the rail and was knocked off balance, plunging headlong over the side. The poor devil fell in front of the monster and was swept directly into the creature's great jaw where the eight-inch-long teeth of the powerful bottom jaw clamped shut, crunching his hapless victim to pulp. It happened almost within the blinking of an eye.

With fresh advance we took hold of the line and rounded in slack, cautiously moving in for the *coup de grâce*. Although tiring quickly, in close quarters the beast could still crush us like an eggshell. Once within range the second mate unsheathed one of his lances, an eleven-foot spear with steel oval blade, and aimed for the vulnerable area behind the right flipper at approximately eye level. This was the life of the whale, whither the animal's massive arteries converged near its heart and lungs. With quick dexterity and skill the lance was given its critical, killing thrust, striking home and slicing with terrible efficiency through the windpipe. Thereupon the whale's lungs were flooded and the supply of blood to the heart dwindled.

"Stern all," our mate called again, and we backed the boat off to a safe distance. The whale briefly submerged, surfaced, and spouted a pinkish-red mist. "We have him now," someone exclaimed. "See—his chimney is afire!"

The death throes did not last long. After about five minutes he rolled dead on his side.

The crew wasted no time in lowering the slender scaffolds of the cutting-in stage over the whale and we pitched in to insert a chain through a slit cut in the flukes which were swung forward. Thither it was brought alongside, floating just awash. Having joined our shipmates on deck, we surveyed the inboards for damage, and found none other than the external layer of copper plating, designed to retard marine growth.

By then it was rapidly nearing sunset. Luckily, we were spared a grueling two to the ship. The whale was ours. But woe the cost, for the sea was haunted with the ghosts of eleven of our men.

The dying rays of the setting sun turned the bloodstained sea into a dark, shimmering rainbow of fire.

Before supper, our master (or "old man" as we referred to him among ourselves) proffered a prayer in memory of our dead mates. It was admittedly a harsh, dangerous, and often violent livelihood, he said, this existence on the unforgiving sea, long and far from family and friends.



But whalemens were a proud and stubborn lot, and pointed out that it was better for an old salt to be lost at sea caught up in the adventure that was his life, than to languish on land and perhaps pass away in a wretched sick-bed in some dismal, shuttered room. And for most of us his words rang true. The old man was in his late thirties or thereabouts, his face rugged yet aristocratic, and sporting an elegant beard. He had signed aboard in his early teens as a lowly cabin boy and gradually worked his way aft to the officer's quarters.

Whilst we weary oarsmen stole a few hours of sleep that night, our other crewmen finished arranging the equipment for the next two or three days' labor: processing the dead whale and rendering it into barrels of oil. The cumbrous iron kettles were uncovered and cleaned, kindling laid under them for when the blubber was ready to be boiled, and water was poured in the brick trough on the floor beneath the tryworks, to protect the wooden deck against the extreme temperatures.

In the early morning we were roused into action: "All hands ahoy! Tumble up and man the windlass! Nothin' but arses 'n elbows this day, mates!" So we each fell to our tasks with a will. We would toil around the clock in six-hour shifts amid an inferno of soot and flame, transforming the *Reaper* into a miniature floating factory.

Upon closer inspection, we soon ascertained that the whale was as peculiar physically as in its previous behavior toward the ship. It was not mottled in color at all—as we had originally perceived—but was partially covered with literally thousands of barnacles. Old battle scars, callouses, sucker-fish, sea-lice, and barnacles were a common sight on just about any whale, but to this degree was most extraordinary. Colonies of such crustacea were generally referred to by whalemens as "dead men's fingers," either owing to the stalked, fingerlike appearance in which they typically grew, or because of their rigid, deathlike grip.

At any rate, even though our former wind had lessened to a light breeze, the ship carried only enough canvas to maintain slight headway, to retard the vessel from drifting in circles and so the gentle forward motion would act to hold the heavy carcass in close to her hull.

The twenty-foot cutting spades were taken from their racks and several of the men set to flensing away huge blanket pieces of the foot-thick, yellowish mantle of fat under the moderately thin outer skin, to be impaled with a hook and hauled on board.

The old man and second mate kept a vigilant eye on everything, insuring that we sliced the blubber to the proper thickness, churned the cauldrons habitually to prevent any settling on the bottom, and making sure the blazing, sputtering fires were kept fueled to the highest intensity.

If anyone was caught shirking in his duties he received a good dressing down: "Show-a-leg there, buckos—this ain't no widow's walk!"

No regular meals were served, but rather we would take an occasional break for a smoke and snack of blubber cracklin's and biscuits dipped in salt water and fried in the oil, or fritters of minced whale meat mixed with potatoes.

The great number of barnacles proved to be a significant hindrance, oftentimes making it nigh impossible to chop into or through them, thereby frustrating our efforts to easily or practically get much of the blubber we sought and repeatedly causing it to tear as it was stripped. The whale was rolled over on its back and the mates wielded their spades with surgical precision to sever the lower jawbone, providing ivory from its colossal teeth. They managed to slash the massive vertebrae and decapitate the beast, employing block and tackle to raise the giant head to deck level near the gangway, so one of the hands could carefully dip out of the natural reservoir therein containing hundreds of gallons of spermacetti, a fine oil highly esteemed by New England candlemakers.

It was not until after noon when I noticed that the mutilated whale had attracted marauding sharks, as usual, but for some very strange reason they were hesitant to approach the carcass too closely—as if they were instinctively frightened of something. It was most puzzling. Yet this was not nearly so mysterious as what occurred late that night, when three of our men were killed in a singularly horrible manner.

The work progressed throughout the night, and by sunup dense clouds of smoke still veiled the rigging, the decks gleaming darkly with blood and grease, enormous masses of blubber scattered here and there. Oil hissed and sizzled in the try-pots, and the entire ship was enveloped in a cloying stench. During the night the listless breeze had virtually died away altogether, the sails scarcely off the masts, and left us stranded in a dead calm.

Sometime before noonday I was belowdecks assisting two other men in placing casks of cooled oil into stowage. We were working toward the bow, wrestling them to fill every nook and cranny. The hold was a confining, gloomy place, imprisoning odd odors and shadows. Suddenly one of the mates accidentally happened upon something behind several displaced barrels in an obscure corner, and his eyes nearly popped out of his head.

Stretched out in grotesque fashion were the corpses of three of our erstwhile shipmates, unmissed from an earlier shift. They had been ravaged beyond belief—barely recognizable for the men they once were.

One of my comrades tore his eyes from the sickening sight and peered intently into the deeper darkness. "Listen," he muttered, "—you hear somethin'?" I hearkened closely and probed the shadows for some sound or movement, but there was nothing stirring.

Anxious to get shy of these shuddersome surroundings, we forthwith notified the old man, who summoned everyone out except for the second mate. After much serious discussion and conjecture he had the sailmaker sew up the bodies—or what was left of them—in some spare canvas, and with quick, quiet ceremony conferred them to the ever-present sharks.

When evening came the *Reaper* drowsed sluggishly in the water, her mast tops towering toward the stars, the sea as black as basalt and smooth as glass. Only an occasional flying fish broke the surface, swiftly gliding off into the night as if in fear.

Perhaps they sensed our own.

About an hour before sunrise, myself and a number of others were awakened by a fearful howl from the second mate's cabin. He came lurching out, barefoot and clad only in trousers, holding one hand away from him with his other. And then we discerned that there was something round attached to the whole back part of his hand. Blood dribbled freely betwixt his fingers and slowly ran down his arm.

"I—I was in my bunk," he stammered, he stammered, his throat tight with fear, "an' I 'spect my arm was hanging out, touching the floor. I woke up feeling an awful pricklin', and found this—this thing on me."

We examined the object carefully. Every now and again it quivered slightly, as if securing itself more firmly in the mate's hand. After several moments it struck us as to why the thing seemed somewhat familiar . . . it was one of the barnacles that thronged our dead whale. But barnacles these obviously were not; just what they truly were, we had yet to learn.

The organism had plainly imbedded itself in the second mate's flesh. We endeavored to pull or pry it off, but the man winced and cried out in pain, unable to endure it. Various other opinions and suggestions were bandied about and tried in due course, such as applying heat to its shell (which prompted it only to dig deeper), yet none of these methods proved the least bit effective. Finally the old man took aside the chippy and spoke for his ears only. Momentarily he returned and gravely informed our second mate that it appeared the only solution to be quit of the creature and to keep him from slowly bleeding to death was to amputate his hand. This may have seemed a rather drastic measure, but as a result of our vain attempts to remove the thing, and the victim's increasing torment and revulsion, the mate reluctantly agreed.

We plied him with the old man's stoutest rum and ere long he lapsed

into a deep, drunken stupor. Forasmuch as we boasted no surgeon or formal doctor on board, the task was left to the butchery of the ship's cooper, or carpenter. When the deed was done the laceration was cauterized with a red-hot iron till the bleeding stopped, so it could be cleaned and dressed. He was carried back to his quarters to sleep it off.

The hand, still with its parasite, was then dropped into a burlap bag and placed in one of the pots of bubbling oil for a long while. When the creature was dead, the sack was discarded and the hand carved away until only the creature remained. We huddled round and studied it in detail.

It was comparatively small—that is, in relation to the others we had noticed on the whale, ranging in size from a man's fist to a large dinner plate, and semi-spherical in shape. It reminded me of a horseshoe crab without its tail. The shell was rough and incredibly resilient, thicker and tougher than a tortoise shell. Someone tried to cut it with a short mincing knife and could not. This chitinous mantle was strengthened by a lower one-half inch band of movable, shelly plates, probably its means of locomotion—a ring of rubbery cartilage from which sprouted sparse, stubby growths of bristle or hair, mayhap some sort of sensory apparatus. Despite the dense and rigid carapace of the creature it was remarkably light in weight.

The underside mouth parts of the animal functioned as a piercing organ, and our scrutiny disclosed a narrow but deep slit running lengthwise which housed several rows of sharp, serrated teeth. Surrounding it was moist, leathery tissue with what looked to be cement glands, and dozens of tiny needlelike claws, each tipped with barbs. On this particular specimen these could be extended as much as five centimeters and were unquestionably the source of its tenacious clinging and boring abilities.

With a skitter of gooseflesh we surmised that this surely explained the presumed rubbing motions of the whale against our hull, having been driven mad with pain. I dare say the longer we pondered the dark possibilities of this the more it seemed plausible. The sperm is primarily a deepwater dweller; its predilection for giant squid, some four hundred pounds and measuring five and fifty feet in length, lured them down more than one-half mile to feed, their awesome under-teeth enabling them to dislodge the squid from their rocky lairs at the bottom of the sea.

Even other whales, such as the slender gray, were known to have surfaced after foraging with their heads and lips besmeared with a murky ooze from the inky depths below. The faint sunlight would give way to utter blackness, and in the unfathomed realm of an eternal night who could guess what alien creatures lurked therein? There were all manner

of sea-floor scavengers, parasites, and suchlike; weird carnivores, primitive snails and other curiosities. The intestines of any whale might be teeming with as many as twenty different kinds of pelagic worms. So it was not improbable at all, then, that our stricken whale had perchance been made host by these odious denizens of the deep, conceivable like wandering through a nest of ticks or fleas.

In light of this revelation, and having stripped the whale of all we could in spite of its myriad "barnacles," we unchained the remains of our hard-earned prize and cast the carcass adrift. But with a trickle of terror we realized the tardiness of this action; for by this time the majority of the creatures had left the dead animal and were now firmly fastened to the bare wood of the vessel's starboard hull, a large portion of the protective copper sheathing having been torn off by the whale.

When another nightfall approached, an atmosphere of dread descended over the sullen ship like a funeral shroud.

The somber gray of dawn brought with it the discovery of two more of our men, both half-eaten. It was appalling. One of the crew members found them together on deck, under the midship shelter. It occurred to us that it was strange that five of our companions had met this gruesome end and yet no one heard an outcry or sounds of struggle. This happenstance led us to suspect that the unfortunate wretches were suddenly swarmed and helplessly covered with the creatures, or else perhaps some of the things possessed the capability to poison or stun their victims (possibly depending on their size or the area of the body whereto they affixed themselves). Or, as in the case of the second mate, they were clearly advantaged by his heavy slumber. Similarly, scuttling armies of cockroaches—some as much as an inch and a half long—frequently nibbled around the lips and beards of exhausted, sleeping sailors in quest of food residues. It was an exceedingly unpleasant speculation.

We again disposed of the corpses, then the old man had us swab down the decks with vinegar and salt water, and fumigate below with pans of burning pitch. However, this was obviously a fruitless gesture, of which we were all well aware, even the captain himself. A prodigious number of the creatures had already infested the ship itself, and during the warm daylight hours they apparently retreated to the dank shadows and more remote parts of the ship, being basically nocturnal in nature and hitherto accustomed to their twilight world beneath the sea.

In several such places we uncovered to our growing horror sticky clusters of what could only be egg deposits, somewhat comparable to a frog's eggsacks. We destroyed those we were actually able to ferret out, or dared to try. Moreover, a quick, tentative inspection of the hold

revealed a new crisis at hand: the things' rapacious appetites had compelled those which remained attached to the hull to burrow themselves deeply into the scantling, weakening the structure in spots and causing the ship to slowly take on water.

The crew grew increasingly morose and fretful, and after midday about half the men began milling together with renewed protests and murmuring. The crew of the *Reaper* was a diverse and rather motley collection: most were in their late teens, some, as I, were in their twenties, and a few, such as the old man, in their thirties; we represented numerous nationalities, including Spaniards, Swedes, Germans, Irishmen, Frenchmen, Italians, and a smattering of Pacific Islanders. And from every walk of life we were—adventurous gentlemen, reckless soldiers, discontented tradesmen; among us a failed Shakespearean actor, a homesick farmboy, a bankrupt Philadelphia hardware clerk, and even myself, a well-educated Kentuckian having given up on my profession as a newspaper reporter in order to “see the world.”

Presently the gathering ambled to the afterhouse, something most assuredly weighing on their minds, and converged toward the old man. The ship's helmsman, whom it was rumored was a British jailbird having escaped from a penal colony in Australia, stepped forward to address the captain. He was a brawny, bullying, “cock-o-the-walk,” but seemed to hold strong influence over some of the others.

“We chaps wish to 'ave a word wi' you, Cap'n,” he announced stonily.

The old man folded his arms and said nothing, waiting.

The other continued, “We been studyin' this—predicament, and seein' as 'ow we got no wind to make for land, think it would be best if we all evacuate the ship—leave 'er to these mis'erable buggers.”

The old man paled at this, being more a challenge than appeal, and swallowed hard. “I forbid it! This ship is under my command, as well as her crew—and I say no.”

“She won't be yours much longer,” the surly helmsman sneered, “'tween the sea and those critters.”

“We can overcome them, somehow—we must. We cannot carry these things with us to an inhabited port . . . you saw their eggs. They would multiply tenfold, continue to adapt, spawn and spread to other vessels, become a plague. Nor can we surrender the ship to them, leaving both an uncertain fate. No, we must keep our wits about us, exterminate them, and bide for a favorable wind. She will not founder if we can make good her course and set-to somewhere safe for repairs. Besides, consider your mates who have given their lives for the wealth in our hold. 'Twould be a crime—nay, a sin—to forsake it.”

“And pray tell what bloody use is any lay to those poor blighters dead since—eaten alive? or to us, about to join them?”

Several others piped in with raucous voices. The captain spotted his second mate amongst them. “You too, man? You side with these mischief makers?”

The second mate raised his already festering, bandaged stump. “Aye, Capt’n. I would gladly give meself over to the mercy of the drink afore I’d let those horrid devils touch me again.”

“But we would be weeks at sea. The nearest coast is bounded by treacherous reefs and strong currents. ’Tis a hostile and uncivilized region—a rugged mountain wilderness. No ship anchors there if they can prevent it. There would be uncounted privations. ’Twould be lunacy, plain and simple, and I shan’t allow it.”

The old man managed to retain his outward composure and a frail façade of authority, but beneath his somewhat faltering speech I detected that he could not avoid being swept up in the same undercurrent of dismay washing over most of the crew. Our good captain, once God Almighty of the quarter-deck, was quickly losing control of his men.

The group’s leader gave him one last, long, ugly, look—and absently fondling his sheath-knife, I noticed—then turned and stormed off. Hereupon the others likewise dispersed, still grumbling.

This aura of tense unrest lingered through the rest of the afternoon, escalating fatefully just before sunset when the brooding silence was shattered by a bloodcurdling scream from the galley. With a prick of panic we rushed to its source and found the cook shrieking in agony, his eyes wide circles of fear. He was flailing his arms and clawing mindlessly at one of the creatures—a very big one—which was feasting on the side of his face. For a second we were all agog, smitten by the horror of the spectacle, until the helmsman, whose chum he was, leapt forward to seize the fiendish creature with both hands, and with all his might wrenched it off of its victim. Tragically, in so doing the thing took with it a third of the cook’s face, exposing raw white bone. His eyes rolled up in the back of his head, his face dripping gore and his mouth gaping open in shock. He fell to his knees, tottered a moment, then collapsed to hit the floor with a ghastly sound. He twitched once or twice and lay still.

The monster had landed on its back a few feet away, and the enraged helmsman grabbed a meat cleaver and viciously hacked at the underside of the creature till it was quite dead. Just then we glimpsed another of the things darting off into the scraps of the shadows, suggesting a surprising mobility more akin to a crab or spider than a snail. Conversely, they also moved slowly and silently, almost as if stealthily stalking their

prey, and could climb upon people or objects without at first being perceived, especially at night.

During the whole of this disaster the old man stood frozen in the background, drugged with the terror of it, saying and doing nothing. The contemptuous helmsman shot him another withering glare, and coldly brushed past him.

That evening the captain doubled the watch, delegating two of his more faithful, older hands, and gave them specific instructions to alert him straightaway if there were any signs of trouble from the disgruntled crew members. The situation was deteriorating rapidly, and things began to look bleak indeed.

Of late we had come to expect the worst, and the following morning brought with it still more reason for our mounting consternation. We found that the two guards were assaulted sometime during the wee hours before light, and the half-dozen men who constituted the preceding day's assemblage had furtively jumped ship. Apparently the two on duty tried to enforce the old man's order, for one of them had been dealt a cruel blow from behind with a belying pin, killing him instantly, intentional or no. The other was pretty bad off due to a dagger wound to the chest. The fellow nearly bled to death and we had difficulty in keeping the bleeding at check. He was more unconscious than not, and his recovery seemed doubtful.

The conspirators left further evidence of their departure, inasmuch as the two remaining whaleboats—in addition to the spare—had been quietly but thoroughly sabotaged. Whether this malicious act was perpetrated to spite the old man or to thwart later probable charges of mutiny and the gallows dance, I could not say for certain. Someone also discovered our stores of victuals and fresh water had been ransacked, as well as assorted and sundry articles pilfered from the supply lockers.

I felt the captain had painted an accurate picture of the ultimate futility of abandoning ship in these waters, and had no doubt but that the scoundrels would all perish long before ever they could gain safety; notwithstanding, such was of little consolation in view of our own plight. There was no practical means of combating these loathsome creatures and they grew bolder day by day. Neither can we hope to mend one of the boats and ourselves escape if needs be, for the carpenter was among the recent victims, and obviously would have been unable to salvage the boat anyway.

As if in further mockery, about three o'clock in the afternoon a light but freshening westerly found us, after almost four days' flat calm. But of course now we were even more seriously undermanned, being just six



of us left, and hardly enough to operate the ship efficiently for any prolonged period of time. I took it upon myself to hoist aloft the appropriate distress flags.

We ate a meager meal at sunset, and by and by headed each to our quarters—three of the hands to the forecabin, the old man to his cabin, and I to the former first mate's cabin which I had recently occupied at the captain's permission. I was about to retire for the evening when I heard a muffled, broken moaning from the lazaret, where we had situated the injured man. Procuring a taper, I proceeded to investigate.

When I peered inside, my stomach turned to ice, for the poor fellow was on the floor verily covered with the creatures—all sizes—as they fell to devouring him alive, moving hungrily about like so many maggots. Inevitably they were lured by the scent of his blood, and now it was too late. Powerless to avail him, I spun and fled, shamefully relieved we had isolated him from the rest of us and shut off that particular section of the vessel. Then I related my grisly discovery to the captain. He made no reply, only sat staring at me blankly, eyes like drab marbles, his face drawn, haggard, and very ashen. He looked as if he had aged fifty years. I left him to his dark imaginings and hurried to my own room, where I eventually managed to obtain a few hours of fitful, troubled sleep.

After the sun was well up the next day I warily ventured back to the scene of the previous night's horror, and found the man's fresh white skeleton, picked quite clean. Upon finishing their ghoulish feast the creatures had, fortunately, vanished elsewhere. I disposed of the grim remains over the side, then came to realize with a shudder that I was the only one up and about. I went below, forward to the forecabin where the other three hands were quartered.

It was dark and musty, as most of the hatches leading up to the light and fresh air were battened down. I approached the doorway cautiously and with a heightening sense of apprehension resolved not to enter the compartment, but merely called out loudly to my mates. There was no answer from within save for a tell-tale scurrying noise. I backed away, noticing for the first time on the floor at my feet the multitudes of sluglike tracks and slimy trails of bloody mucus extending off in all directions.

With skin suddenly acrawl, I retreated quickly and returned aft, bringing myself up to the old man's cabin door. Knocking repeatedly, calling to him in a tone of growing alarm, he finally responded. He sounded distracted, distant and hoarse, betraying a note of terrified resignation beyond despair.

"Go away!" he croaked. "Leave me be."

"But sir," said I, "you did not answer, and the others . . ."

"I am fine," he snapped, his voice rising to an angry tremor. "—Begone with you!"

Confused and concerned, I withdrew to my cabin for the remainder of the day, feeling increasingly helpless, a chilling and forlorn weight upon my shoulders. Then, at about dusk, I was startled by the loud report of a pistol from the old man's stateroom, and frantically bolted through the main cabin into his sleeping quarters. My shock was complete when I found him on his berth, having just put a ball of lead through his brain. Blood was everywhere and almost at once I detected a movement to my right, turning so to encounter not one but several of the creatures scuttling swiftly through his cabin toward where the dead man lay.

Fully fearing now for my own life, I fled to my cabin and thought quickly. Doubtless these demons would soon be upon me as well, lest I acted shrewdly and with haste. This room had no door, but rather a makeshift curtain that could be drawn. With desperation born of fear, I struck on the idea of prying loose my bunk and positioned its frame and pallet upright across the doorway. It was a thin and relatively flimsy obstacle, though I pushed a heavy sea-chest against it for additional support.

Wiping my brow of the perspiration there, like warm rivulets of fear, I became painfully cognizant of how cramped and inadequate my refuge was, and somehow cold as a crypt.

The night slowly ebbed away, merciless in its eternity. I am the lone survivor of an entire crew of able-bodied men, and a hideous death creeps on the other side of my temporary barricade. In these long, darkling hours I have screwed up my courage and set to pondering as objectively as possible my dire state of affairs, ever mindful of the fearsome skittering and chewing sounds issuing from immediately outside my cabin. We have inadvertently brought these accursed creatures up from the bottom of the sea, and there appears to be no alternative but to send them back whence they came. My plan is simple yet perilous. If, at dawn's first light, I can dash across the galley and the length of the steerage, and can hurl a well-aimed, burning oil-lamp into the blubber room, the greasy try-works will ignite instantly and burn fiercely, the conflagration hopefully consuming everything on her before she goes down. And, saints willing, I can escape speedily up through the main hatch and take some substantial jetsam overboard with me onto which I can cling.

Our first mate kept the ship's log, and since his death the old man had assigned me to keep the daily entries, my being learned of books. I have been previously too preoccupied by the calamity of the past few days to

do so, but now bring everything to date, and leave this journal as both witness and warning, in the event something goes awry. I pray no one ever need find this, that I am successful in my mission and the *Reaper* is consigned to her watery grave.

Alas, I feel the time has come. I go now, to do what must be done.

In his gloomy cabin aboard *Jezebel*, Captain Seabury finished reading this last line of script and slowly closed the log. Morbid recollections of the pitiful skeleton at the foot of the steerage companionway, with the shattered oil-lamp beneath it, flickered ominously in the dark recesses of his mind. And now he comprehended with dawning horror the full implications of the strange account he had just read. The night had almost slipped by, like a thief, unnoticed. In less than two hours it would be daybreak, the men preparing to transfer the oil from the *Reaper*. He was but a fool—damn the oil! Orders must be given immediately to torch the nightmare ship and cast loose before it was too late.

All at once he heard a terrified scream from somewhere on board his own ship, touching every inch of his body with fear. This was promptly followed by another, and then he cleared the paralyzing fog in his head long enough to realize that this second came from his own throat.

Indeed, for something large, wet, and cold was slowly crawling up his leg . . .

## Dead Week

Leonard Carpenter

*Born in Chicago in 1948, Leonard Carpenter grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and attended college at Berkeley—an experience which furnished the background to “Dead Week.” Says Carpenter: “There’s a certain pressurized intensity to student life, when we’re still finding out whether we’re viable human beings or not, which all of us share to some extent. It’s a time of great discovery and of great dread; I hope the story conveys it.”*

*“Dead Week” is Carpenter’s first professional sale, followed by “The Ebbing” in Writers of the Future. Just now he is under contract to write new Conan novels for Tor Books; his first two, Conan the Renegade and Conan the Raider, have recently come out. Carpenter now lives with his wife and twin daughters in Santa Maria, California. He hopes to make writing a full-time career.*

FROM 6:00 P.M. until 11:00 P.M., Cassy slept the sleep of the hunted. She awoke still dressed, stiff and cold on her cot, and lay for a long time in a semicomatose state watching the ghosts of car lights creep across the ceiling.

Sleeping odd hours was a method she used to cope with her roommates’ erratic study habits, and their taste for bluegrass music played loud and long. Now the house below her was finally quiet. The long night lay ahead for a last-ditch effort to prepare for finals next week.

Cassy couldn’t understand why no one else ever needed to study. Between her full load of classes, the cafeteria job to supplement her meager scholarship, and the lab requirements for the advanced biology program, she had no time left. The endless talking, socializing, and kicking back that the others engaged in were luxuries she couldn’t afford. By accepting a steep increase in rent she had managed to get a room to herself—not a room really, just a cramped vestibule atop the back stairway, probably rented out in violation of fire regulations. But she needed it to study in peace.

Her first task, the one she had been dreading, was to clean off her desk. It was an unexplored drift of papers reflecting the disorder of her own mind—books, lecture notes, handouts, reading lists, and who-knew-what-else dumped there in moments of exhaustion during the semester. Now she would need to review all her course requirements in order to cram efficiently. She dragged herself up, switched on the naked bulb overhead, plugged in her coffee pot, and went to work.

The job went faster than she expected. Most of the papers could be arranged by course number and date or thrown away. The notes were legible, if sparse, and she had really only fallen behind in her reading a few weeks before—so maybe things weren't so bad.

Then she found something. Near the bottom of the mess was a pink, printed card with the hours and days of a week blocked out like a calendar, bearing the motto "Courtesy of the Berkeley Student Bookstore." The card itself wasn't strange—the times of Cassy's classes, labs, and work shifts were sketched into it with the care of someone mapping out a glorious new life, long before it turned into a murderous routine.

The strange thing was that on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons at 3:00 P.M.—right in the middle of her cherished library study time—were penciled blocks labeled "Demo 168."

It looked like her writing, but it puzzled her. She certainly wasn't taking any courses in demonology. Maybe it was demolitions—she laughed, thinking that would make a good poli-sci course. On an impulse she picked up her dog-eared schedule and directory and thumbed through the alphabetical listings. There it was, in tiny computer print, underscored in red pencil. "Demography Dept.—Demo 168—133 Dwinelle Hall—TTh 3."

Intrigued and a little disturbed, she plunged into the thick yellow course catalog. "Demography 168. 3 units. The Limits of Population. An exploration of the theoretical and practical limits to population growth, with special emphasis on the roles of birth and death controls in restoring equilibrium. Professors Thayer and Munck."

Slowly, with the elusive quality of a dream, it came back to her. She had indeed considered taking the course in February, nearly five months before. She'd even attended one or two lectures. The subject had sounded interesting—and relevant, she had thought, to the populations of microbes she would be working with in bio. She'd heard that it was a smart precaution to sign up for extra classes in case your first preferences were too crowded.

But the professor had indicated that the course would focus on human

populations, using a social-science approach. That was the main reason Cassy had dropped it.

At least she seemed to recall dropping it. She began hunting through the desk drawers. There it was—the green carbon copy of the enrollment card, signed by her faculty advisor. As she read it her heart plunged and her fingertips felt numb. It listed five courses; the fifth one was Demo 168.

But that was crazy! How could she be taking a course without even knowing it? She was sure she hadn't bought any of the texts—at some point she must have just stopped attending and forgotten all about it.

Frantically she searched through the last of the clutter on the desktop. A single sheet, mimeographed in pale purple, came to light. It read, "Demography 168—Course Requirements. The grade will be based sixty percent on the final exam and forty percent on the term paper, to be handed in at the last class meeting. Lecture attendance is recommended. Required reading: *Man against the Ceiling* by Storvich and Smith, Sutton House, 1973; *The Dynamics of Death Control* by E. C. Festung, 1978 ed.; *Sower and Reaper* by G. Hofstaedler, Vendome, 1979. Additional readings to be assigned periodically."

Cassy felt a great, sinking despair. The chance of catching up so late in the semester was nil. She would have to request some kind of administrative relief. Whether it would affect her scholarship, she didn't know.

There was certainly nothing to be done so late at night—and no one she could talk to. She tried to study for other classes, but thoughts of the phantom class kept twisting through her brain. As the night dragged on she accomplished nothing more. Sleep was unattainable.

The most upsetting thing was the realization of her own mental lapse—somehow, under all the demands and stress, her mind had slipped gears. Was it the first time? Would it be the last?

The Berkeley campus seemed deserted the following day as Cassy walked to the Admin Building. Dead Week, students called it—week of anguished repentance for thoughtless months of procrastination. The sky was steely gray with the fog that can make San Francisco Bay summers colder than its winters. Swishing sprinklers transected the lawns.

Cassy's route passed Barrows Hall, the eight-story math building. She involuntarily glanced at the demolished shrub where a grad student had dived from the roof a few days before. He had been the second suicide to choose the boxlike building this term, the fourth this school year. They were keeping the roof doors locked now.

Sproul Hall loomed impassive on the left, seemingly built of sugar cubes. The plaza wasn't deserted—its bizarre bazaar never ceased. Two die-hard disc throwers, a vagrant guitar player, a revivalist preacher ranting to nobody, and an odd assortment of street people were all doing their things. Cassy hurried through. Somehow the sight of the anonymous social transactions taking place here only intensified her loneliness.

Cassy had friendships, of course—smooth working relationships with the people in her major, her job, and her house. But she felt there was some kind of sustenance she wasn't getting. She knew that she didn't fit the conventional beauty standard; the schoolkid puns about "Cassy's chassis" had stopped being funny after her chassis became a little too stout for most boys' liking. And though she had definitely and finally determined that she was not "pig-faced," it was depressing to have to remind herself of it each time she looked into a mirror.

Not that she wanted a delirious romance. Her schedule didn't allow for it. Summer loomed ahead, with two accelerated class sessions, more hours at the cafeteria, and a visit or possibly two with her mom. She would have liked to do more dating and partying, but lately the guys who approached her always seemed a little slimy. "Let's talk about you," they said; "Tell me about yourself"—willing to give only as much as they absolutely had to. Their attention shifted too easily. The latest one, Howie, had been that way. He had left a message for her a few weeks ago, but she had forgotten to return his call.

Inside Sproul Hall there were long lines at the administration window in spite of Dead Week—students fighting their bureaucratic battles to the bitter end. No one in her line said anything to her; Cassy vainly opened up her biochem text and stared at the chapter on protein synthesis.

When her turn came she tried to explain her situation. The clerk, a bored girl who looked younger than Cassy herself, pointed to an orange bulletin under the glass countertop. "I'm sorry, the last day to add or drop classes was March third."

"But I never really took this class. I mean, I didn't mean to!" She felt herself getting in deeper. "I don't need it . . . I only took it by mistake."

"I'm sorry. The only way to drop now would be to withdraw from the University." The girl peered over Cassy's shoulder to summon the next one in line.

"But that's impossible . . . my other classes. My scholarship! I want to talk to someone else, please."

"You could ask the instructor for a grade of Incomplete."

"Please let me talk to someone else."

“Very well, you’ll have to make an appointment to see the dean. His office is on the second floor, in front of you as you leave the stairwell. Next.”

After waiting in the dean’s anteroom and making an appointment for the following day, Cassy didn’t have time to go home before her work shift. Instead she went to the Graduate Social Sciences Library in Stevens Hall. There, at the back of a yellow-lit aisle in the soundless stacks, she was able to find one of the books on the Demo 168 reading list, the Festung text. It was a hardcover maroon volume two inches thick, and it looked as if no one had ever opened it. The glossy pages were densely printed, with graphs of sociological data.

The chapter titles made it sound pretty heavy. “Nature’s Inexorable Balance,” “Death Controls Versus Human Ingenuity,” “The Pathology of Crowding,” “The Role of the Unconscious,” and so on. The graphs dealt mainly with crime rates and deaths from various causes as functions of population density, in an endless series of uptailing curves. The prose was impenetrable—written in Berkeleyese, a pretentious academic style that tries earnestly to make itself immune to all criticisms and ends up qualifying itself into meaningless obscurity.

Typical social sciences material, Cassy thought. There was no hope of making sense of it without the lectures and the teacher’s help, if she did end up having to do the coursework.

That was one reason Cassy had majored in biology. It has no shortage of cumbersome facts and figures to grapple with, but there was also the laboratory work—real, concrete procedures that could show the truth or untruth of the theories in solid, life-or-death terms. She was good in the lab, and it was largely on the strength of this aptitude that she’d been accepted into the advanced bio program.

Of course, it had put unexpected demands on her time and cut into her other activities—but she didn’t mind. It made her feel good to be valued as a researcher. Much of it was routine work and errand-girl stuff—growing and feeding cultures, caring for test animals, and delivering specimens—still, she was learning a great deal about immunology research. Some of it was quite advanced; she suspected that the lab programs were tied to defense—though her instructors would never admit that, with the current sentiment on campus.

Returning home in a haze of fatigue, Cassy cut across the grassless front lawn and climbed the porch steps of her house. It was a worn, gaudily-painted Victorian perched on a roaring one-way street. The front



door stood open and an acrid smell drifted out. She headed down the hall, past the communal kitchen, and heard voices raised.

"There she goes now." It was an angry-sounding female, Vickie or Connie, speaking from one of the rooms. An intense murmur interrupted her, and then the voice shrilled, "Well, somebody's got to tell the creep!"

Cassy turned as Dave's tee-shirted figure, built square for soccer, appeared in the kitchen doorway. His face was set grimly. "Cassy, come here." He jerked his head in the direction of the kitchen.

Cassy complied. Dave stepped back to reveal the room. The acrid smell was heavier here, and the ceiling was smoke-stained. The blackened, ill-scrubbed stove with scorched and blistered cabinets above it resembled an altar.

"We had the fire department here this morning, Cassy," Dave said. "After you left. Did you forget to turn off the burner?"

Cassy felt numb, confused. "Well, maybe . . . I'm not sure . . ."

"Sure she did." Vickie, dressed in tight jeans and Dave's sweatshirt, came through the door that joined their room to the kitchen. "It was her crap piled up on the stove that caught fire. If Bruce hadn't smelt it, we would've all burned to death in our sleep." She thumped across the floor in bare feet and confronted Cassy. "What's with you anyway?"

"I'm sorry . . ." Cassy had only a vague recollection of her hurried breakfast of coffee, toast, and donuts. "I've been so busy lately . . ."

"Busy—jeez!" Vicki threw up her hands violently. "We could be dead right now, and you're busy!" She rolled her eyes ceilingward. "How do we know you won't do it again tomorrow? You sneak around here, and never talk to anybody . . ."

Dave put a hand on her shoulder, gingerly. "Vickie, I think she gets the idea."

"Butt out, Dave." Vickie twisted out from under his hand and went on, "You stay up all night. You know, we can hear you moving around up there. When you walk back and forth, it makes the whole house creak."

Cassy reddened. "Well, that's better than some of the things I've heard coming from your room!" She turned and started down the hall.

Vickie ran out of the kitchen after her. "Bullshit! You almost burned us alive! You leave your coffee grounds all over—and the weird stuff you eat takes up most of the space in the fridge!"

Dave was physically restraining her. "That's enough, Vick."

"I don't care," she screamed. As Cassy started up the back stairs, Vickie was yelling, "Why don't you just move out!"

Next day Cassy sat in the office of Dean Moody while he thumbed

through her master file. Over his shoulder, visible through the venetian blind, the soaring ivory tower of the Campanile chimed out eleven o'clock. He looked up and pinched his clean-shaven lips into a smile.

"Just an oversight, you say? Well, whatever the cause, I think we can make an exception in view of your excellent academic record. It can be written up as a late drop for health reasons. All that will be required are the signatures of the instructor and your faculty advisor." He took a card from his desk drawer, filled it in partially, and handed it to her. "You can turn it in at the window downstairs."

Cassy had no difficulty getting the signature of her advisor, Professor Langenschiedt. He was so busy between the affairs of the Medical Physics Department and the Academic Senate that he scarcely listened to her explanation before expressing every confidence in her good judgment, signing the form, and hurrying her out.

The approval of the course instructor was another matter. Cassy had some uneasiness about approaching him to tell him she'd lost interest in his class. Every academician takes his job seriously; she didn't really suppose that he'd consider her case important enough to warrant withholding his signature, but she anticipated an unpleasant encounter.

She had reconstructed a fairly clear mental picture of Professor Thayer from the beginning of the term: tall, tweedy, with squared-off tortoiseshell glasses and gray hair sculptured around his brow. His lectures had been dry and dispassionate, giving no hint of his general disposition.

She looked up his office number and went in search of it. Her quest took her through the cavernous lobby of Dwinelle Hall and into its dim, labyrinthine recesses. In building the hall and adding Dwinelle Annex, the designers had violated some basic law of architectural geometry, or else one of human perception. Angular corridors and half-flights of stairs created baffling and often frightening missteps for those who ventured inside. The sickly-brown light reflecting off the floor added to the eerie effect. But after many detours and hesitations, Cassy found the indicated door, number 1521, and knocked. "Come in!"

As she opened the door a flood of daylight came through, so that she could see only the outline of the man behind the desk. The tall window looked out on a tree-filled quadrangle, and the north wall opposite was bright with sun.

Professor Thayer closed the book before him and motioned Cassy to a chair. "Hello, Miss . . . uh, I'm pleased to see you. Aren't you in one of my classes?"

"Well, yes I was . . . I mean I am. That's sort of what I needed to talk to you about. I stopped going after the second lecture."

“Why, that’s funny—I thought I’d seen you more than that. I recognize your bangs.”

Cassy blushed. Although she had been busy all day formulating excuses, they evaporated now. Cassy told him simply and truthfully what had happened. There was something so reassuring in his manner that she went into more detail that she had done with anyone, and she finished with a lump in her throat. She took the drop card out of her book bag and placed it on his desk.

Professor Thayer nodded at it, but didn’t seem in any hurry to sign.

“Tell me,” he asked, “how many units are you taking?”

“Fifteen. Besides your class, I mean.”

“That’s quite a load. You also work part-time?”

“Yes sir. At the Meals Facility. And my lab requirement is six hours a week, but I usually spend more time than that.” Cassy didn’t mean to sound abject, but somehow she didn’t feel like holding anything back.

“You must be under great stress. I can see how it might cause, uh, a slip of the kind you describe.” He smiled. “Of course I’ll be glad to sign your card.” But instead of reaching for it, the professor folded his arms, leaned back in his chair, and began to profess.

“It’s a shame, in a way, that you couldn’t have taken my class. It would have given you some insight into a problem that’s affecting you—and affecting us all, whether we know it or not.

“The course deals with overpopulation. It’s been controversial in the Demography Department, since it probably should be called a sociology or population-ecology course instead; some of my colleagues don’t approve of my taking what amounts to a moral stance, by saying just how much population is too much. But since the class deals specifically with human society, and most of the data are here, I’ve kept it in the department.

“We explore the correlation of increased population density with all the classes of effects—from high rents to disrupted living conditions, stress, violent crime, suicide, *et cetera*. One of the key factors at work is *anomie*—the insecure, faceless ‘lonely crowd’ feeling discussed by Durkheim and Riesman. It’s hard to define an emotion like that scientifically, but it’s easy to see its results; they fill the front pages of our newspapers—with gruesome statistics.” Professor Thayer prodded a fat green softcover volume of census figures at the side of his desk, so that it flopped shut of its own weight.

“Of course, when you’re discussing overpopulation, there’s no better example of it than the student body of a large school like Berkeley. In this case, the population pressure is artificial—resulting from the crush

of students to a favored institution—but it's intense enough to develop all the classic effects: high rents, crowded living conditions, the overload of facilities, and above all, stress. An interesting microcosm." Professor Thayer gazed speculatively at Cassy for a moment, then resumed.

"The intriguing approach is to view all these social problems not just as ill effects, but as attempts by a dynamic system to balance itself. Death controls, in E. C. Festung's phrase.

"When a population exceeds natural limits, it definitely will be reduced—if not by birth control, then by death controls such as famine and disease. The human species is uniquely fortunate in having the power to choose—though we don't seem to be using that power.

"Festung identified a wide range of behaviors peculiar to man as death controls: war, terrorism, violent crime, transportation accidents, cult suicides, nuclear 'events'—the professor drew imaginary brackets around the word with two pairs of fingers—"all the unique disasters we take for granted today. He maintains that they all stem from an instinct, inborn in mankind far beneath the level of rational thought, to reduce a population that, unconsciously, we perceive as too large. Like caged birds in the five-and-dime pecking each other to death. In effect, crowding is seen to induce irrational and aggressive behavior. A fascinating theory." This time his pause was punctuated by the sound of sparrows chirping outside in the quad.

"Unfortunately, it all tends to sound very morbid. Many students can't work with it—too depressing. They'd rather just shrug it off, at least until it becomes too big to ignore. Like so many contemporary issues, it's a hard one to face—I've seen some fine minds become paralyzed by a sort of ecological despair." He massaged his chin a moment. "In a way, your little bout of forgetfulness parallels the attitude of all Western society toward the population issue, ever since the time of Malthus. The initial warnings were just too grim, so we thrust it away to the back of our minds. Unfortunately that doesn't alleviate the problem."

The professor lapsed into silence and stared out the window for a while, hands folded. Then he bestirred himself and looked at his watch. "Oh my, I see I've run on for quite a while. You ended up taking my course anyway—the special condensed version. Hope I didn't bore you. Or depress you. Here, I'll sign this."

In a few moments Cassy was being ushered out the door. She didn't regret having spent so long with Professor Thayer. He was cute, though long-winded—and a lot of what he said sounded awfully unscientific.

Leaving Dwinelle she headed for the lab. After that, home, to do some serious cramming!

So Dead Week ended, if not quite happily, then at least hurriedly. Although the menace of the phantom class was laid to rest, Cassy knew that the distraction and delay had hurt her study effort—perhaps seriously. So she halved her sleep time and doubled her coffee intake to catch up, and in a while agony faded to mere numbness. Perhaps it didn't matter anyway—she had always found that final grades bore no recognizable relationship to her effort of understanding.

To complicate matters, there was a flurry of last-minute activity at the lab. An ill-timed biochemical breakthrough had Cassy making special trips around the campus to deliver files and samples when she should have been doing a dozen other things. In the department she sensed excitement and an unspoken pressure to keep the matter quiet—if not permanently, then at least until summer break, when the majority of the students would have gone home and the chance of protest lessened.

On Wednesday the lunch crowd in the Meals Facility was only slightly smaller than usual. A few of the diners moved with the sanctified air of having finished their final exams; others carried stacks of books on their trays and looked haggard. Cassy stood behind the counter doling out portions of stew, chicken, and enchiladas.

A familiar face appeared in the customer line. "Hello, Professor Thayer," she said brightly.

"Why, hello, Cassy! Oh, that's right—you told me you worked here, didn't you?" The professor put on a playfully pensive look. "Hmmm. I wonder what's good today."

"Everyone's having the Caesar salad," said Cassy, smiling. "It ought to be good—I helped make it." She reached for a clean bowl and began to dish up an especially generous helping.

At that moment she noticed the Erlenmeyer flask right there before her—from the lab. It was nearly empty of bacterial toxins, type K. It really didn't look much different from the salad dressing cruet—but that was over on the table by her purse, and it was still full. Again that lightheaded feeling, of gears slipping somewhere.

Cassy and the professor heard a tray crash and looked out across the expanse of tables. Something was happening. A man near the window lurched, fell across a table, and rolled to the floor. There were violent movements elsewhere in the room, and out on the terrace.

Then the screaming began.

## The Sneering

Ramsey Campbell

*Ramsey Campbell has been a regular in The Year's Best Horror Stories since the first volume. Since his first book in 1964, a collection of Lovecraftian stories entitled The Inhabitant of the Lake & Less Welcome Tenants, Campbell has developed his own distinctive style of intensely introspective horror fiction. In recent years he has frightened readers with novels (The Face That Must Die, Incarnate, Obsession), short story collections Dark Companions, Cold Print, and as editor of anthologies (Superhorror, New Terrors I and II).*

*Born in Liverpool on January 4, 1946, Campbell now lives in Merseyside, where he continues to find unsuspected horrors in his native city. Perhaps more than anyone else, Campbell represents the new generation of horror writers who had paid their dues long before the recent boon in the genre's popularity. Campbell's latest books include a novel from Macmillan, The Hungry Moon; a collection of erotic horror stories from Scream/Press, Scared Stiff; and a third of an original anthology from Dark Harvest, Night Visions 3. He is currently at work on a new supernatural novel, The Influence.*

WHEN THEY'D COME home the house had looked unreal, dwarfed by the stalks of the streetlamps, which were more than twice as tall as any of the houses that were left. Even the pavement outside had shrunk, chopped in half by the widened roadway. Beneath the blazing orange light the house looked like cardboard, a doll's house; the dark green curtains were black now, as if charred. It didn't look at all like his pride. "Isn't it nice and bright," Emily had said.

Bright! Seen from a quarter of a mile away the lights were ruthlessly dazzling: stark fluorescent stars pinned to the earth, floating in a swath of cold-orange light watery as mist. Outside the house the light was at least as bright as day; it was impossible to look at the searing lamps.

Jack lay in bed. The light had kept him awake again, seeping through the curtains, accumulating thickly in the room. The curtains were open

now; he could see the lower stretch of a towering metal stalk, gleaming in the July sunlight. Progress. He let out a short breath, a mirthless comment. Progress was what mattered now, not people.

Not that the lights were the worst. There was the incessant jagged chattering and slow howling of machinery: would they never finish the roadworks? They'd finish a damn sight faster if they spent less time idling, telling vulgar jokes, and drinking tea. And when the men had sneaked off home there was still the traffic, roaring by past midnight, past one o'clock, carrying the racket of passengers, shouting drunkenly and singing—the drivers too, no doubt: they didn't care, these people. Once or twice he'd leapt out of bed to try to spot the numbers of the cars, but Emily would say, "Oh, leave them. They're only young people." Sometimes he thought she must walk about with her eyes shut.

The machinery was silent. It was Sunday. The day of rest, or so he'd been brought up to believe. But all it meant now was an early start for the cars, gathering speed on the half-mile approach to the motorway: cars packed with ignorant parents and their ill-spoken children, hordes of them from the nearby council estate. At least they would be dropping their litter in the country, instead of outside his house.

He could hear them now, the cars, the constant whirring, racing past only to make way for more. They sounded as if they were in the house. Why couldn't he hear Emily? She'd got up while he was asleep, tired out by wakefulness. Was she making him a pot of tea? It seemed odd that he couldn't hear her.

Still, it was a wonder he could hear anything over the unmannerly din of traffic. The noise had never been so loud before; it filled the house. Suddenly, ominously, he realized why. The front door was open.

Struggling into his dressing-gown, he hurried to the window. Emily was standing outside the shop across the road, peering through the speckled window. She had forgotten it was Sunday.

Well, that was nothing to worry about. Anyone could forget what day it was, with all this noise. It didn't sound like Sunday. He'd best go and meet Emily. It was dim in the pedestrian subway, her walk wasn't always steady now; she might fall. Besides, one never knew what hooligans might be lurking down there.

He dressed hastily, dragging clothes over his limbs. Emily stood hopefully outside the shop. He went downstairs rapidly but warily: his balance wasn't perfect these days. Beneath the hall table with its small vase of flowers, an intruding ball of greasy paper had lodged. He poked it out with one foot and kicked it before him. The road could have it back.

As he emerged he heard a man say, "Look at that stupid old cow."

Two men were standing outside his gate. From the man's coarse speech he could tell they were from the estate. They were staring across the road at Emily, almost blocking his view of her. She stood at the edge of the pavement, at a break in the temporary metal fence, waiting for a chance to cross. Her mind was wandering again.

He shoved the men aside. "Who are you frigging pushing?" demanded the one who'd spoken—but Jack was standing on tiptoe at the edge of the traffic, shouting, "Emily! Stay there! I'm coming! Emily!"

She couldn't hear him. The traffic whipped his words away, repeatedly shuttered him off from her. She stood, peering through a mist that stank of petrol, she made timid advances at gaps in the traffic. She was wearing her blue leaf-patterned dress; gusts from passing cars plucked at it. In her fluttering dress she looked frail as a gray-haired child.

"Stay there, Emily!" He ran to the subway. Outside his gate the two men gaped after him. He clattered down the steps and plunged into the tunnel. The darkness blinded him for a moment, gleaming darkly with graffiti; the chill of the tiled passage touched him. He hurried up the steps on the far side, grabbing the metal rail to quicken his climb. But it was too late. Emily had crossed to the middle of the roadway.

Calling her now would confuse her. There was a lull in the traffic, but she stood on the long concrete island, regaining her breath. Cross now! he willed her desperately. The two men were making to step onto the road. They were going to help the stupid old cow, were they? He ran to the gap in the metal fence. She didn't need them.

She had left the island, and he was running to it, when he saw the car. It came rushing around the curve toward Emily, its wide nose glittering silver. "Emily, watch out!" he shouted.

She turned and stood, bewildered, in the roadway. The men had seen the car; they retreated to the pavement, gesturing at Emily. "Get back!" they shouted, overlapping, confusing.

He couldn't reach her in time. The car rushed toward her. He saw the driver in his expensive silver-painted frame: young, cocksure, aggressive, well-groomed yet coarse as a workman's hands—everything Jack hated, that threatened him. He should have known it would be such a man that would take Emily from him.

The driver saw Emily, dithering in his path. His sidewhiskered face filled with the most vicious hatred Jack had ever seen. He wrenched at the wheel. The car swooped round Emily, coiling her with a thick swelling tentacle of dust. As she stood trembling, one back wheel thudded against the curb outside the house. The car slewed across the roadway toward



a lamp-standard. Jack glimpsed the hate-filled face in the moment before it became an explosion of blood and glass.

Emily was running aimlessly, frantically, as if her ankles were cuffed together. She staggered dizzily and fell. She lay on the road, sobbing or giggling. The two men went to her, but Jack pushed them away. "We don't want your help, thank you. Nor yours either," he told the drivers emerging from their halted cars. But he accepted Dr. Tumilty's help, when the doctor hurried over from glancing at the driver, for Emily was beginning to tremble, and didn't seem to recognize the house. More drivers were gathering to stare at the crash. Soon Jack heard the approaching raucous howl of the police. The only thought he could find in his head was that they had to be deafening in order to shout everyone else's row down.

"What are you doing?"

"Just looking."

She turned from the front-room window to smile at him. Looking at what, for heaven's sake? his frown demanded. "I like watching people go by," she said.

He could see no people: only the relentless cars, dashing harsh sunlight at his house, flinging dust. Still, perhaps he should be grateful she could look. It seemed the doctor had been right: she didn't remember the accident.

That had been a week ago. Luckily the doctor had seen it happen; the police had questioned him. A policeman had interrogated Jack, but had left Emily alone, calmed by a sedative. Jack was glad she hadn't encountered the policeman, his sarcastic deference full of innuendo: "Does your wife take any drugs, sir? I suppose she doesn't drink at all? She wouldn't be under treatment?" He'd stared about the house in envious contempt, as if he had more right to be there than Jack—just as the people from the estate would, if they saw something different from their concrete council houses.

The council— They provided such people with the homes they deserved, but not Jack and Emily, oh, no. They'd offered compensation for the inconvenience of road-widening. Charity, that was all that was, and he'd told them so. A new house was what he wanted, in an area as quiet as this had used to be when he'd bought the house—and not near any estates full of rowdies, either. That, or nothing.

Emily was standing up. He started from his reverie. "Where are you going?"

"Over to the shop to buy things."

"It's all right, I'll go. What do you want?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'll see when I get there."

"No, you stay here." He was becoming desperate; he couldn't tell her why he was insisting. "Make me a list. There's no need for you to go."

"But I want to." The rims of her eyes were trembling with tears.

"All right, all right. I'll help you carry things."

She smiled brightly. "I'll get my other basket," she said, and ran upstairs a few steps before she had to slow.

He felt a terrible dry grief. This nervously vulnerable child had been the woman he'd married. "I'll look after you," he'd used to say, "I'll protect you," for he'd loved to see her turn her innocent trusting smile up to him. For a while, when they'd discovered they could have no children, she had become a woman, almost a stranger—neurotically irritable, jealous of her introversion, unpredictably morose. But when he'd retired, the child had possessed her again. He had been delighted, until her memory had begun to fail. It was almost as though his love for the child in her were wiping out the adult. His responsibility for her was heavier, more demanding now.

That was why they had gone to the seaside while the road widened: because the upheaval upset Emily, the glistening mud like ropes of dung where the pavement had been. "Our house will still be here," she'd said. "They won't have knocked that down"—not like the post office up the road. Their months by the sea had cost the last of their savings, and when they'd returned it was too late to accept the council's offer of compensation, even if he had intended to. But he mustn't blame Emily.

"Here's your basket. Won't you feel silly carrying that? Come on, then, before it gets too hot."

As they reached the gate he took her arm. Sunlight piled on them; he felt as though the clothes he wore were being ironed. Up the road, near where the post office had been, a concrete lamp-standard lay on the new roundabout, protruding rusty twisted roots. A drill yattered, a creaking mechanical shovel hefted and dumped earth. Men stood about, stripped to the waist, dark as foreigners. He pursed his lips in disapproval and ushered Emily to the subway.

The tunnel was scattered with bottles and wrappings, like leavings in a lair. The tiles of the walls were overgrown with a tangle of graffiti: short white words drooled, red words were raw wounds, ragged-edged. Another of the ceiling lights had been smashed; almost the whole of the tunnel was dim, dimmed further by the blazing daylight beyond. Something came rushing out of the dimness.

He pulled Emily back from the mouth of the tunnel. It must be a

cyclist—he'd seen them riding through, with no thought for anyone. From the estate, no doubt, where they knew no better. But nobody emerged from the dimness: nothing at all.

A wind, then, or something rolling down the steps on the far side. He hurried Emily through the chill darkness; she almost stumbled. He didn't like the subway. It felt cold as a flooded cave, and the glimmering graffiti seemed to waver like submarine plants: he mustn't over-exert himself. The sunlight leapt at him. There was nothing on the steps.

"Oh hello, Mrs. Thorpe," the shopwoman said to Emily. "Are you better?" Stupid woman. Jack chattered to her, so that she couldn't disturb his wife. "Have you got everything?" he kept asking Emily. He was anxious to get back to the house, where she would be safe.

They descended the subway steps more slowly, laden now. The passage was thickly dark against the dazzle beyond. "Let's get through quickly," he said. The darkness closed around him, snug and chill; he held Emily's arm more firmly. Cars rumbled overhead. Dark entangled colors shifted. The clatter of their hurry filled the tunnel with sharp fluttering: that must be what he heard, but it sounded like someone rushing toward them. Someone had almost reached them, brutally overbearing in the dark. For a moment, amid the writhing colors and the red filter of his panting hurry, Jack glimpsed a face. It was brief as lightning: eyes gleaming with hatred, with threat.

Jack rested in the sunlight, gripping the metal rail. No wonder he had glimpsed the face of the driver from the accident; he had almost panicked then, too. And no wonder he'd panicked just now: suppose roughs had waylaid Emily and himself down there? "I think we'll use the shops on this side in future," he said.

Back in the house he felt ill at ease, somehow threatened. People stared through the windows as if into cages. Were they what Emily liked watching? The sounds of cars seemed too close, aggressively loud.

When the evening began to settle down, Jack suggested a walk. They wouldn't use the subway, for the pavements across the road glittered with grit and glass. As he closed the gate carefully behind him a car honked a warning at Emily: impertinence. He took her arm and led her away from the road, into the suburb.

The sounds of the road fell behind. Trees stood in strips of grass laid along the pavements; still leaves floated at the tips of twigs against a calm green sky. He felt at home now. Cars sat placidly in driveways, cars were gathering outside a few of the semi-detached houses; people sat or stood talking in rooms. Did the people on the estate ever talk to each other, or just watch television all day? he wondered, strolling.

They'd strolled for several streets when he saw the boys. There were four of them, young teenagers—not that one could be sure these days, with them all trying to act older than they should be. They were dressed like pop singers: sloppily, not a suit among them. As they slouched they tugged at garden hedges, stripping leaves from privet twigs. "Do you live there?" Jack demanded. "Then just you stop that at once."

"It's not your house," said one, a boy with a burst purple lip; he twisted another twig loose.

"Go on. You just move along or you'll get something you won't forget."

"Ooh, what?" the purple-lipped boy cried, pretending effeminacy. They all began to jeer at Jack, dancing around him, dodging out of reach. Emily stood by the hedge, bewildered. Jack held himself still, waiting for one of them to come close; he could feel blood blazing in his face. "Go on, you young ruffians. If I get hold of you—"

"What'll you do? You're not our father."

"He's too old," one giggled.

Before Jack knew what was happening Emily leapt at the boy. She'd pulled a pin from her hat; if the boy hadn't flinched back the point would have entered his cheek, or his eye. "Mad old bitch," he shouted, retreating. "My father'll do you," he called as the four ran off. "We know where you live."

Jack felt stretched red, pumped full of blood. "We'd better get home now," he said harshly, not looking at her. The dull giant pins of the lamp-standards stood above the roofs, looming closer. The rough chorus of cars grew louder.

A car snarled raggedly past the gate. As Jack started and glanced back, he glimpsed movement in the subway. A pale rounded shape glimmered in the dark mouth, like the tenant of a burrow: someone peering out, framed by the muddle of graffiti. Up to no good, Jack thought distractedly. Unlocking the front door, he glanced again at the subway; a brief pale movement vanished. He turned back to the door, which had slammed open as something—a stray wind—shouldered past him.

He sat in the front room. Now, until the streetlamps glared, the drawn curtains were their own dark green. He could still feel his urgent startled heartbeats. "You shouldn't have flown at those boys," he said. "That wasn't necessary."

"I was defending you," she said plaintively.

"I had control of the situation. You shouldn't let these people make you lose your dignity."

"Well, you needn't have spoken to them like that. They were only

young, they weren't doing much harm. If you make them resentful they only get into worse trouble."

"Are you really so blind? These people don't have any love for us, you know. I wish you could see what they'll do to this house after we're gone. They'll be grown up by then, it'll be their kind who'll spoil what we've made. And they'll enjoy it, you mark my words." He was saying too much, but it was her fault, with her blind indulgence of the young—thank God, they'd never had children. "You just watch these people," he said. "You'll have them taking over the house before we're gone."

"They're only young, it's not their fault." As though this were incontestable proof, she said, "Like that poor young man who was killed."

He gazed at her speechlessly. Yes, she meant the driver in the crash. She sounded almost as if she were accusing Jack. All he could do was nod: he couldn't risk a retort when he didn't know how much she remembered.

The curtains blackened, soaked with orange light. Emily smiled at him with the generosity of triumph. She parted the curtains and sat gazing out. "I like it now it's bright," she said.

Eventually she went up to bed. He clashed the curtains together and sat pondering somberly. All this harping on youth—almost as if she wanted to remind him he had been unable to give her children. She should have married one of the men from the estate. To judge from the evidence, they spent half their time stuffing children into their wives.

No, that was unfair. She'd loved and wanted him, she still did. It was Jack she wanted to hold her in bed. He felt ashamed. He'd go to her now. He switched out the light, and the orange oozed in.

As he climbed the stairs he heard Emily moaning, in the grip of a dream. The bedroom was full of dim orange twilight, pulsing with passing lights. The bedclothes were so tangled by her writhing it was impossible to decipher her body. "Emily. Emily," he called. Her face rolled on the pillow, turning up to him. A light flashed by. The dim upturned face grinned viciously. It was a man's face.

"You, you—" He grabbed blindly for the lightswitch. Emily's face was upturned on the pillow, eyes squeezed into wrinkles against the light, lips quivering. That must be what the flash of light had shown him. "It's nothing, nothing. Go back to sleep," he said sharply. But it was a long time before he was able to join her, and sleep.

He had bought the house when he was sure they could have no children. It had cost their old home and almost the whole of their savings. It was meant to be a present for Emily, a consolation, but she hadn't been

delighted: she had thought they should leave their savings to mature with them, but property was an investment—not that he intended ever to sell the house. They had argued coldly for weeks. He couldn't bear this new, logical, disillusioned Emily: he wanted to see delight fill her eyes. At last he'd bought the house without telling her.

Unlocking the door, he had held his breath. She'd gazed about, and in her eyes there had been only a sad helpless premonition that he'd done the wrong thing. That had been worse than the day the doctor had told him he was sterile. Yet over the years she'd come to love the house, to care for it almost as if it were a child—until now. Now she did nothing but gaze from the window.

She seemed content. She seldom left the house, except for the occasional evening stroll. He shopped alone. The scribbled subway was empty of menace now. Once, returning from the shop, he saw Emily's face intent behind the shivering pane as a juggernaut thundered by. She looked almost like a prisoner.

The imitation daylight fascinated her most—the orange faces glancing at her, the orange flashes of the cars. Sometimes she fell asleep at the window. He thought she was happy, but wasn't sure; he couldn't get past the orange glint in her eyes.

She was turning her back on their home. Curls of dust gathered in corners, the top of the stove looked charred; she never drew the curtains. Her attitude depressed him. In an indefinable way, it felt as though someone were sneering at the house.

When he tried to take over the housework, he felt sneered at: a grown man on his hands and knees with a dustpan—imagine what the men from the estate would say! But he mustn't upset Emily; he didn't know how delicately her mind was balanced now. He swept the floor. His depression stood over him, sneering.

It was as if an intruder were strolling through the house, staring at the flaws, the shabbiness. The intruder stared at Emily, inert before the window; at Jack, who gazed sadly at her as he pretended to read. So much for their companionship. Didn't she enjoy Jack's company anymore? He couldn't help not being as lively as he was once. Did she wish he was as lively as the mob outside the window?

He couldn't stand this. He was simply depressing himself with these reveries. He could just make out Emily's face, a faint orange mask in the pane. "Come upstairs now," he said gently.

His words hung before him, displaying their absurdity. The sneering surrounded him as he took her arm. It was coarse, stupid, insensitive; it jeered at them for going to bed only to sleep; but he couldn't find words

to fend it off. He lay beside Emily, one arm about her frail waist; her dry slim hand rested on his. It distressed him to feel how light her hand was. The orange dimness sank over him, thick as depression, dragging him down toward a dream of sleeping miserably alone.

It was all right. She was beside him. But something dark hung over her. He squinted, trying to strain back the curdled dimness. It was a face; curly black hair framed its vicious sneer. Jack leapt at it, punching. He felt no impact, but the face burst like a balloon full of blood. The blood faded swiftly as a firework's star. He knew at once that he hadn't got rid of the face. It was still in the room.

His fist was thrust deep into the blankets. He awoke panting. He tried to slow his heart with his breathing. The orange light hammered at his eyes. He turned over, to hold Emily, to be sure he hadn't disturbed her. She was not there.

At once he knew she'd wandered out on the road. The sneering surrounded him, still and watchful. He fumbled into his dressing-gown, his feet groped for his slippers. He heard the rapid swish of cars. His head was full of the thud of a body against metal, although he had heard no such sound. He ran downstairs. He felt his mouth gaping like a letter-slot, making a harsh sound of despair.

He stumbled down into the dark. He was rushing uncontrollably; he almost fell. Parrallelograms of orange light lay stagnant inside the front door. He scrabbled at the lock and bolts, and threw the door open.

The road was bare beneath the saucers of relentless light. Only a blur of dust hung thinly above the surface. Perhaps she was in the subway. His thoughts had fallen behind his headlong search. He had slammed the gate out of his way before he realized she couldn't have bolted the door behind her.

He was awake now, in time. But he was still running, toward the snarl of a car swinging around the curve. He tottered on the edge of the pavement, then regained his balance. When he turned back to the house he saw Emily gazing between the front-room curtains. The car sped round the curve. Its light blinked in the window beside Emily: a pale bright flash, an oval glimpse of light, a face, a sneering face.

He ran into the room. "Will you get away from there and come to bed!" he shouted. His shock, his treacherous imagination, were rushing his words out of control. "Why don't you bring everyone into the garden if you want to look at them? Bring them into the house?"

She turned and stared at him. For an awful moment he was sure she'd forgotten who he was. "I'm Jack! I'm your husband!" but he couldn't bear

to say it, to know. After a while she began to walk slowly, painfully toward the stairs.

But perhaps she'd heard what he'd said. The next day several children were playing football on the pavement, using the top of their subway steps as a goal. "Don't play there," she shouted through the open window. "You'll get hurt." They came to the hedge and pointed at her, laughing, making faces. When she didn't chase them, they ventured into the garden. Before Jack could intervene she was chasing them wildly, as if she thought the pavement was as wide as it used to be.

They were returning for another chase when he strode out. "If I see you again I'll get the police to you." He glanced at Emily, and his stomach flooded with raw dismay. Perhaps he was mistaken, but he was sure that as the children had run out of the far end of the subway he'd glimpsed in her eyes a look of longing.

Chasing the children had exhausted them both. She sat at the window; he read. The day was thickly hot and stagnant, nothing moved except the cars. He felt as though he were trapped in someone's gaze.

"These children these days," she said. "It isn't their fault, it's the way they're brought up. Do you know, some parents don't want their children at all."

What was she trying to say? What was she sidling toward? He nodded, gazing at the book.

"Did you see that little girl before, that we were chasing? She had such a pretty face. It's such a pity."

Surely she wasn't heading where he suspected, surely she knew better. The heat held him limp and still.

"Don't you think it's up to people like us to help these children?" The longing was clear now in her eyes. "The unwanted ones, I mean. We could give them love. Some of them have never had any."

"Love won't feed them," he told the book.

"But we could go without. We always buy the best meat, you know. I've still a little money that I've saved from housekeeping."

He hadn't known that. Why didn't she invest it? But he felt too exhausted even to change the subject with that argument—exhausted, and depressed: she wasn't musing any longer, she was serious. "And we don't really need such a large house," she said.

Before he could recover from this betrayal she said, "Don't you think it would be nice to bring up a little girl?"

She had never mentioned adoption before. Nor had he; the idea of a strange child in his house had always seemed disturbing, threatening.



Now there was a stronger reason why they couldn't adopt a child: they were too old. "We wouldn't be able to," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because we're too old!" But when he met her bright, trusting, childlike gaze, he couldn't tell her. "Too much work. Too exhausting," he said.

"Oh, I wouldn't mind that. I could do it." Every objection he made she demolished. She had more experiences of life than most parents, she'd been brought up decently herself, she would love the child more than its own parents could, it would have a good home, they'd keep the child away from bad company. All day she persisted, through dinner, into the evening. Her eyes were moist and bright.

The orange light sank into the room, stifling. Emily's words closed him in. He was trapped, shaking his head at each point she made; he knew he looked absurd. He mustn't remind her they were old, near death. Why must she persist? Couldn't she see there was something he was trying not to say? As he stared at the book, the orange light throbbed on his eyes like blood. "We could sell the house, that would leave us some money," she said. "Wouldn't you like a little girl?"

"No," he blurted at the book. "No."

"Oh, why not?"

His answer was too quick for him. "Because the authorities wouldn't let us have one," he shouted, "you stupid old woman!"

Her face didn't change. She turned away and sat forward, toward the window. Her shoulders flinched as though a lash had cut them. "I didn't mean that. I'm sorry," he said, but she only sat closer to the pane.

He must go to her, hold her—except that when he made to stand up he felt intolerably fatuous. Every nuance of his apology echoed in his head; it sounded like a bad actor's worst line, he felt as if he were at the mercy of an audience's contempt. The sense of his own absurdity, more relentless than the heat of the orange light, pushed him back into his chair.

Emily leaned closer to the window. Suddenly he knew she was trying to see her face in the glass. She went to the hall mirror. He saw her see herself, her age, perhaps for the first time. Her face seemed to slump inward. She walked past him without a glance and sat before the window.

"Look here, I'm sorry." He was whining, each word made him feel more contemptible. Perhaps it was her contempt for him that he was feeling. It gathered darkly on him, atrociously depressing.

He couldn't comfort her while he felt like this. In fact, if it were his own depression, it might be affecting her, too. He must go upstairs,

hoping she would heal by herself. Even to stand up was a struggle. She sat still as he left the room, glancing back miserably at her.

Upstairs he felt a little better. At least he could close his eyes and clear his mind. He lay limply in the heat; orange painted the dark within his eyelids. Emily would get over it. She would have had to realize eventually. He couldn't think for her all the time, he shouted defensively. He couldn't protect her all her life. The orange glow didn't contradict him. It was soothing, empty, calm.

No, not entirely empty. Something was rushing toward him from deep in the emptiness. As it came it breathed depression at him, thick as fumes. It was rushing faster, it was on him. A face was pressed into his, bright with hatred. Before he had time to flinch back, there was nothing—but something was rushing toward him again; it thrust into his face for a moment, grinning. Again. The face. The face. The face.

He woke. His hands were clenched on the sheets. The face was gone, but for a moment, though depression muffled his thoughts, he knew why it had been there. The man had been killed without warning; he meant Jack to feel the sudden ruthless terror of death. And Jack did. He lay inert and appalled.

All of a sudden, for no reason, his depression lifted—as if someone standing over him had moved away. His mind brightened. He scoffed at his dream. What nonsense, he had killed nobody. It took him a while to wonder what Emily was doing.

He needn't run. She would only be sitting at the window. But he fought away the soothing of the orange calm and hurried to the stairs. Emily was in the hall, at the front door. Her hand was on the lock.

"Where are you going?" She glanced up at the sound of his voice. As she saw him her eyes filled with a mixture of disgust and fear. She pulled the door open; orange light spilled over her.

"Emily, wait!" She was on the path. He ran downstairs, almost falling. He was halfway down when the depression engulfed him like sluggish muddy water. At once he knew that it was surrounding Emily, blinding her to him. It had reached its intended victim.

She was running, a small helpless figure beneath the orange glare. The light spoiled her blue dress, staining it patchily black. She was moving headlong, as fast as the threat in his dream. She snatched the gate out of her way. Amid the nocturnal chorus of the city, a car was approaching.

"Stay there, Emily!" Perhaps she heard him; something made her run faster. The light throbbed, his eyes blurred. For a moment he saw something perched on her shoulder, a dark thing as big as her head,

trembling and vague as heat. When he blinked his eyes clear, it had gone, but he was sure it was still beside her. He was sure he knew its face.

She was on the roadway now, still running—not toward the far pavement, but toward the speeding car. Jack was running too, although he knew he couldn't save her. She was determined to be killed. Even if he caught her, their struggle would take them under the car.

But she mustn't die alone, with the whisper of hatred and depression at her ear. That death would be like his dream, but prolonged endlessly. She must see that he was with her. He ran; the road and the lamp-standards swayed; the orange light pounded, and his breath clawed at his lungs. He had no chance of overtaking her. She wouldn't see him.

Suddenly she slipped and fell. Jack ran faster, panting harshly; he felt the pavement change to roadway underfoot. Perhaps he could drag her out of the way—no, he could hear how fast the car was approaching. He ran to her and cradled her in his arms. She seemed stunned by the pain of her fall, but when her eyes opened he thought she saw him and smiled weakly. He managed to smile, too, although he could feel a darkness rushing toward them. Suddenly he wondered: since her tormentor had stayed here, would they be tied here, too? Was this only the beginning of their struggle?

He pressed her face into his chest to hide from her what was upon them: the car, and the grinning face inflated with blood.

## Bunny Didn't Tell Us

David J. Schow

*David J. Schow was born on July 13, 1955 in Marburg, West Germany—a German orphan adopted by American parents. His travels eventually led him to Los Angeles, where he now lives. An avid film fan, Schow claims to know more movie trivia than even Dennis Etchison. Schow's short fiction has appeared in Twilight Zone Magazine, Night Cry, Weird Tales, Whispers, Fantasy Tales and elsewhere. He has been a columnist for various publications and a contributing editor to film books. His eight-part series on the television show, The Outer Limits, written for Twilight Zone Magazine, formed the basis for his book, The Outer Limits Omnibus, due from Berkley Books this autumn, Schow has also written a dozen or so novelizations and series novels under at least four pseudonyms—most recently a series of four novels based on television's Miami Vice, written under the byline Stephen Grave. Tor Books has published his horror novel, The Kill Riff. Schow's two previous entries in The Year's Best Horror Stories have ranged from mordant whimsy ("One for the Horrors") to gut-wrenching horror ("Coming Soon to a Theatre Near You"). In "Bunny Didn't Tell Us" Schow treats us to a bit of graveyard humor.*

THE GRAVEROBBERs worked as quickly and silently as they were able. It began to rain lightly.

The fact sounded more like the opening line to a bad grade-school joke, but the fact was that most of the embalming crew on the night shift at Forest Lawn were tae kwon do freaks. They spent as much time showing off new moves as they did tending the latest batch of customers, and were so self-involved that they represented no threat at all. Ditto the guards—they usually hated blundering about the vast cemetery in the rain. Professionalism was one thing; superstition another.

Riff favored working in the rain no matter what the scam. Water seemed to wash away both sentries and their willingness to pry, as well as providing safe background noise for nocturnal endeavors.

They were knee-deep in the hole. Riff gathered a clump of turf in one hand and squinted at it as he crumbled it apart. Rain funneled in a steady stream from the vee of his hat. "Recently tamped," was all he said, wiping his hand on his grimy topcoat. All around them the rainfall hissed into the thick, manicured landscaping.

Mechanically, Riff jabbed his folding Army spade into the dirt, stomped on the edge, and chucked the bladeful of earth over his shoulder to the right. Klondike faced him in the hole, duplicating the moves one half-beat later. Both had learned how to turn out a foxhole in Korea, and in no time they were four feet down, then five.

Klondike's spade was the first to thump against something solid and hollow. "Bingo," the larger man muttered.

Riff hesitated, then tossed back another gout of dirt anyway. Klondike smelled like a wet bearskin, and his permanent facial shadow of black beard stubble served to camouflage his face in the darkness. Riff did not necessarily enjoy working with someone as coarse as Klondike, but all his life he'd made a virtue of never questioning orders.

"Wait," he said, and the big man froze like a pointer. Riff tapped the surface beneath their feet with his spade. "Sounds funny."

They knelt and swept away clots of dirt with their gloved hands.

"Time," said Riff.

Klondike peeled back the cuff of his glove and read his luminous watch face. "0345 hours," he said. The fingertips of his gloves were stylishly sawn off, and Klondike promptly used the moment of dead time to pick his nose. "Ain't got us much time," he whispered. "Funk-hole's turning to mud."

"I know that," Riff said, hunkered down in the bottom of their excavation and resisting the urge to add "you imbecile." He plucked a surgical pen-light from a coat pocket and cupped his palm around the beam, leaning close. "Look at this."

The dime-sized dot of light revealed a silver dent—left by Riff's spade—in a smooth surface of brilliant, fire-engine red enamel. Klondike ran his fingers over it, and stared dumbly at his hand while the tiny scar in the otherwise flawless surface refilled with water.

"Bloody hell!" snapped Riff. "Bunny didn't tell us that the guy was buried in his goddamn *car*!"

Suddenly the drumming of rain on the exposed metal surface seemed to become incriminatingly loud.

Riff's ties to Bunny Beaudine ran back to the middle 1970s, and a half-witted punchline Bunny had fomented about finding employment for needy military vets. A decade before, Bunny had been just another

seedy Sunset Boulevard pimp, chauffeuring his anemic, scabby stable of trotters around in a creaking, third-hand Cadillac whose paint job was eighty percent primer. Then Bunny discovered cocaine, and his future turned to tinsel. Coke required bodyguards, and Bunny learned to be Bad.

Riff suspected that Bunny got a kick out of two things: Hiring white dudes to accomplish his dirty work, and vigorously dipping into his own inventory for personal gratification, both the ladies and the face Drano. His usual checklist of dumb jobs included low-power dope deliveries, playing cabbie for the girls—Bunny now captained a fleet of Mercedes from the cabin of his own Corsair limo—and the odd bit of mop-up. It was a living.

Bunny's strongarm boys packed magnums and broke bones with the frequency Riff broke wind after a plate of lasagne. Once he'd taken that first job for Bunny (a cash pass deliberately miscounted, as a test for Riff's honesty), Riff understood that there was no shaking hands, no clean leavetakings. Since he had no other prospects—1976 was a lousy job year for vets—it was just as well.

Until this current assignment came along. Riff remembered how it had gone down in Bunny's Brentwood "office."

Bunny had been laughing, flashing his ten-thousand-dollar teeth. "Poor old Desmond," he cackled. "Poor soul."

Riff had gotten a phone call and had shown up precisely on the half-hour. "What became of Desmond?" Desmond was one of Bunny's competitors. They cursed each other in private and slapped each other's shoulders, trading power handshakes, whenever anyone else was watching.

Two of Bunny's boys bellowed deep basso laughter from across the room.

"Why, poor old Desmond somehow got his ass blown off," said Bunny. "Terrible thing. You can't even live in the city anymore . . ."

The watchdogs stopped guffawing at a wave of Bunny's hand. His pinkie ring glittered and his broad-planned African face went dead serious. Riff stood, arms folded, waiting for the show to end so business could become relevant.

"What it is," Bunny said to Riff, "is this. You remember Desmond, Riff, my man?"

"I saw him a few times."

"You remember all those rings and slave bracelets and shit he used to wear all over his hands?"

"Yeah," said Riff. "Mandarin fingernails, too."

“Them’s was for tooting. But you recall, right?” Bunny was nodding up and down. So far so good. “One of them rings was a cut-down from that diamond they called the Orb in the papers—stolen from that bitch in Manhattan last year.”

“The one married to the toilet-paper tycoon.” Riff knew the ring. It was cut down, all right, but was still of vulgar size, and worth at least a hundred grand.

“You got it. Well, here’s a little piece of trivia that nobody knows. Poor old Desmond was buried wearing that ring.”

Riff was already beginning to get the picture. As with all pimps up from gutter level, Desmond had insisted on burial as lavish as his lifestyle, and in a boneyard as obscene as the diamond he’d hired stolen. Riff looked back at the bodyguards. “Why didn’t you just have your goons steal the ring after they blew the back of his head off?” he said, smiling.

Bunny kept his happy face on. “Why, there ain’t nobody in the world would finger me; that was a accident, man,” he said, his voice sing-song and full of bogus innocence. “Besides, we take the ring *then*, that means Desmond’s boys be hunting it, and I don’t want to end this life in the trunk of some Mexican’s Chevy being drug out of the ocean by the police.” He pronounced it *police*. He shrugged. “But now—now, as far as Desmond’s people are concerned, that rock is a permanent resident of Forest Lawn, by the freeway. Ain’t nobody gonna miss it now.”

The goons chuckled on cue. Riff drew Klondike as an accomplice mostly because the hulking halfwit was the wrong color to make it in the world as a bodyguard for Bunny, but the bonus Bunny pushed in Riff’s direction erased any objections. The only hitch was that no amount of cash could get Riff clear of Bunny now.

That was how Riff’s adventure in the rain had begun.

“Shit!” Klondike beefed. “Asshole pimp six feet under in his muthafuggin’ pimpmobile!”

“Watch your language,” said Riff. “And keep your voice down!” Slick mud was beginning to join them in the hole, in force. He scooped out the bilge with his hands.

“What kinda car is it?”

*Who cares*, thought Riff. Dumb question; dumb goon. “Just dig, before we drown.” He wanted to find out if they were near a car window they could break, to cut excavation time. They’d been putzing around on the roof for nearly half an hour. Riff realized they were on top when he found the insulated rectangle of the sunroof. The car was gigantic—maybe a

full-stretch limousine. He traced the outline of the sunroof with a finger while Klondike continued to bail sludge from an awkward squat.

"Crowbar!" Riff said over his shoulder. Soon the horizon would turn pink-gray with predawn light, and he mentally damned the end of daylight savings time again.

Klondike poked his head out of the hole, did a quick three-sixty, and returned with the crowbar. His own private mudslide was right behind him. Things were getting gooey.

"All clear topside," he said.

Not sure which side the sunroof opened from, Riff had a moment of indecision, and that was when he heard the grinding noise. It was a low whirring basso against the lighter sound of the pattering rain.

The sunroof was opening. Yellow cabin light sprayed upward from the widening hatchway.

Things happened too fast for Riff to keep track. He fell backward onto his rump in surprise, thinking, *It's one of Bunny's goddamn tricks, goddamn Bunny it's—*

It seemed a funny thing to hear a big lug like Klondike screaming. His voice spiked Riff's ears, cracking high with terror.

"Riff! It's got my leg I can't Riff help HELP ME—!"

And in the sickly glow of the limousine's interior lights, Riff saw what had ahold of Klondike's leg.

The suit sleeve was crushed black velvet; the cuffs, ruffled lace. The kind of overblown getup a showoff like Desmond would demand to be buried in. The ebony claw dragging Klondike backward was threaded with luminescent white mold. The brown jelly of rot glistened in the light, and the dagger fingernails that were Desmond's coke-snorting tools—now jagged and cracked—gathered, seating themselves in Klondike's left calf.

Klondike hollered.

Riff was backed into the humid mound of turned earth. He might have yelled, but his throat seemed stuffed up with grave dirt, and his tongue hugged the roof of his mouth in fear.

There was nothing for Klondike to grab as an anchor, and the relentless tow of the slime-clotted hand pulled him, wriggling, to block the light from within the buried car. Another arm slid through the crack of space and snaked around Klondike's waist in a hideous bear-hug, from below. Dense black mud was dripping down into the car as Klondike thrashed to no gain against the dead, locked embrace.

Riff could still see, too well.



The pressure increased. Gray knuckle bones popped through wet splits in the decayed meat, and Klondike screamed one last time.

The sound of his back breaking apart was the splintering of dry bamboo, the crunching of ice between the teeth. It cut off the screaming. Then Klondike, all of him, began to fold into the hole in a way Riff had never seen a human body bend before.

Riff's own body thawed enough to move, and one hand grasped the spade. He took a single step closer.

Klondike's body hung upward in a ludicrous bow-shape, feet and arms in the night air. Something else in his body suddenly gave way with a sharp, breaking-carrot noise, and he sagged a few inches farther down into the sunroof.

Riff, trembling, raised the spade, blade down. Klondike was as dead as a side of beef. Riff was not watching him so much as the moldering hands that pulled him down. There, on the middle finger of one, was the diamond.

When he lifted the spade to strike, the dark, oily mud greasing the roof of the car skimmed his feet from beneath him, and he sprawled headlong on top of what was left of Klondike.

Now Riff screamed, because the groping claw had locked around the lapel of his topcoat three inches from his nose, pulling him inexorably downward along with his inert partner. Klondike's stale animal odor stung Riff's nostrils for a fast instant before being washed away by the eye-steaming stench of putrefaction. Riff's guts boiled and heaved. He was sinking into the impossibly small sunroof.

He flailed; got his heel against the lip of the hole. Like a hungry spider, the graveyard hand was making for his Adam's apple, and he fought to slow it down. When his fingers sank into the oleaginous dead flesh, he killed the onrushing spasm of revulsion by jerking backward hard enough to dislocate his shoulder.

He had a grip on the ring when he did it.

The thick, drenched tweed of the coat separated with a heavy purr drowned out by the rain. Riff plunged backward and wedged into the rapidly dissolving dirt mound, shuddering uncontrollably, teeth clacking, completely apeshit with panic.

In the sickly yellow glow, he saw that the maggotty flesh of the ring finger had stripped away like a rotten banana peel, exposing a still-clutching skeleton finger. The sound it made against the red enamel was like a fork tine raked against a porcelain sink.

Brown gunk was leaking from between his own fingers, and he opened his fist to reveal a diamond almost as big as a golf ball, nestled in clumps

of buttery skin that was warm only because it had been inside Riff's closed hand.

Riff's body would not move; he was frozen from the bowels down, his back married to the pit wall. If he looked away, all he would see were dancing, round-edged rectangles of yellow light.

Klondike's chin was still perched on the edge of the sunroof. The now-ringless hand in lace and black velvet circled his body and tugged. Klondike's upper row of teeth caught on the rubber insulation strip. Another tug, and his forehead bonked against the hatch. Then the rest of him slid into the hole all at once and was gone.

Riff was whimpering now, still cemented to the spot, transfixed by the waiting yellow hole. He could just see the upper curve of one of the phony electric braziers on either end of the front windows. Yellow squares overlapped in his pupils; in his mind he saw a million times over the rotting hand emerging again, grasping, pulling up a shoulder, revealing a head and torso . . .

"Here!" he yelled, his bones finally grinding into motion. "Here, God damn it! Keep it! Bunny wanted it, not me! *Take it back—!*" He flung the diamond without aiming. It bounced on the roof with a thunk, and wandered toward the sunroof like a crystal BB in a Brobdinagian puzzle maze.

It decided at last to drop in, and vanished, noiselessly.

Riff's treacherous body now insisted that he run, that he set an Olympic record for running in the rain.

The sunroof began to whirr slowly shut, paring away the light. Riff's heartbeat punched away at his throat. The last of the ooze in his hand was rinsed away.

Then he piled out of the hole and hauled his poor white ass toward the freeway at maximum speed. In forty-five minutes the rain changed to a five-alarm downpour, and Riff stood in his own private puddle, facing the singularly unamused gaze of Bunny.

"Turn him out," said Bunny, flatly, and two of his boys winnowed down to his waterlogged skivvies.

"I told you I don't have the ring," said Riff, still shivering. "But you're not going to believe that any more than you'll believe that Klondike—"

"Pulled a doublecross, bashed you with a shovel, tied you up with your own coat and took the diamond?" finished Bunny. His eyes bugged, watery and yellow with sickle-cell. "Shit. Any one o' them things, maybe—but Klondike didn't have enough battery power to invent all

four. You're jerking me around, Riff my friend. Maybe you didn't even make it out to the grave, huh?"

Riff swallowed. Bunny was getting ready to do something nasty.

"I'm not lying," he said carefully. "Klondike is still at the gravesite."

Anticipating Bunny's next accusation, one of the hulks flanking the doorway to the office stepped forward. "I know what you're thinking, boss," he said in a voice as deep and growly as a diesel truck engine. "That boy Desmond is as dead as one of them barbecued chickens in the market. Me and Tango was a hundred percent sure." He back-stepped to his place at the door, and Riff thought of a cuckoo clock.

"You took a hundred percent of my green," said Bunny. "You *better* be goddamn sure." He said gah-dam.

"Can I have my pants back?" said Riff. Regrettably, it drew Bunny's pique away from his bulldogs and refocused it on himself.

"Give him his duds," said Bunny. "He's going out there with us." He rose to his buggywhip-skinny six-two and wired an expensive pair of rose-tinted shades around his face. "And if you're snowjobbin' me, boy—"

"I know," Riff nodded as he fought his way back into his sodden clothing. "I'll have a hard time peddling Veteran's Day poppies wearing a cast up to my eyebrows."

"You got it."

They made the drive in funereal silence, and nobody cared about the dawn and the dirty floormop hue it turned the horizon. LA's surface streets were flooding by now, and the homeowners in the Hollywood Hills would be cursing the mudslides, and it was obvious that visitor business at Forest Lawn would be just . . . Well, thought Riff—they were assured of no disturbances, anyway.

The gorilla named Tango broke out three umbrellas in basic black, and nobody moved to share one with Riff, who led them down to Plot #60 from an access road charmingly called Magnolia View Terrace. It proved a lot easier than sneaking up from the freeway. The heavily saturated turf around Desmond's final resting place made their shoes squish. Bunny's Gucci loafers were goners, Riff thought with not a little satisfaction.

Forest Lawn was discreet concerning such peccadilloes as vandalism. No matter what happened to Desmond's grave, the news would never make the *Times*, and the wad of bills Tango had slapped into the gatekeeper's palm guaranteed privacy for proper mourning.

One of those characteristic Astroturf tarps had been pegged over the hole. Desmond's garish monument stone spired toward outer space like a granite ICBM.

"So what?" Bunny said loudly as a jolt of thunder shook the ground. "They covered it up!" said Riff.

All three men turned to look at him. "I can see that, null and void," Bunny snapped. "Get on with it!" The pimp stood with his hands deep in the pockets of his black overcoat, Tango's buddy holding an umbrella over him like a dutiful Egyptian slave. Riff never could dredge up the guy's name—the two were as interchangeable as knife maniac movies—so he pointed at Tango. "Help him," Bunny said, and Tango eyed the tarp doubtfully before stepping sidewise down into the pit. Bunny thought he could hear a noise through the downpour, a kind of electric fly-buzzing. Maybe construction equipment was working somewhere nearby.

Riff held up the corner of the tarp for Tango. There was a very dim yellow glow emanating from beneath it, and water had pooled in its middle, causing it to sag.

As Tango ducked under the tarp, Riff planted his foot dead bang into the bigger man's ass, driving him inside. The tarp flopped wetly back into place. Tango's partner saw it happen, and automatically broke his revolver from its armpit holster, bringing it to bear on the bridge of Riff's nose.

But by then, Tango had started screaming.

He shot up against the tarp from beneath, hurling water all over the trio just as Bunny pointed to Riff and shouted, "Blow him away!" Then he took a miscalculated step that dumped him onto his butt in the mud.

Riff grabbed the big magnum barrel just as it went off in his face. There was a backward tug as the slug whizzed cleanly through the sleeve of his overcoat. The pistolero's second shot headed off into the stratosphere as the slimed incline of the pit came apart like warm gelatin under his heels. He slid indecorously down into Riff's embrace. As he flailed for balance, Riff wrested the gun away and gave him a no-nonsense bash in the face with it that flattened his nose to cartilaginous pulp and rolled his eyeballs up into dreamtown.

It had taken maybe two seconds, total. Riff quickly climbed to the rim of the grave. He knew how, by now. The gunman's semiconscious body oozed slowly downward until his legs were beneath the tarp edge. Then he was pulled the rest of the way inside.

Topside, Bunny was still on his back, trying to scramble his own petite shooting iron past the silver buttons on his double-breasted overcoat. He looked up, glaring hotly, and saw a dripping, mud-caked bog monster pointing an equally mud-caked revolver in his direction. His hands stopped moving and his eyes became very white.

From behind Riff, there came a sound like a green tree branch being

twisted in half, followed by nothing except the patter of the new rain. One of the tent pegs popped loose and the tarp sagged into the hole.

Bunny's face was a livid crimson-black with rage. The knowledge that he had been outdrawn, however, did not stop him from trying to preserve his image by saying, "I'll kill your ass for this, you know," in his quiet, bad-pimp's hiss.

"What it is, Bunny," said Riff, gesturing with the gun, "is you need to climb down into this hole."

"*Tango—!*" Bunny screeched, trying to crawl backward.

Riff frowned and shot Bunny once, in the left leg just below the kneecap. Blood mingled with the mud and gore spoiling his seven-hundred-dollar suit. "This isn't a *movie*, Bunny; just get in the hole."

Hiding his pain behind clenched teeth, Bunny began to drag himself toward the pit. When he backed down into it, on top of the tarp, his hands going wrist-deep in the muck, he looked up at Riff and in his best snake-charming voice said, "Why?" mostly to buy a couple of seconds more. It was extra seconds that always counted in rescue time.

"Because I gotta change my life, Bunny," he said, looming over him with the gun.

*Buy more seconds.* "I'll let you," said Bunny, gasping now. "Anything you want, man. Partners. We'll—"

Riff was about to tell Bunny not to bullshit a bullshitter when the ruglike tarp heaved mightily up, splitting in the middle. The first thing that came out was yellow light. The second thing that came out was a black velvet-clad arm that captured Bunny's wounded leg in its trash compactor grip very nicely. Bunny slid three more feet with a loud cry of pain.

One thing about those limos, Riff thought as he turned away and walked back up the slope. He'd noticed it during the ride out in Bunny's own chariot. They sure had a lot of room inside.

Bunny's pocket pistol fired four, five times behind him and then stopped.

Riff pawed around under the limousine's bumper for the magnetic case containing the spare keys, and when he got behind the wheel he involuntarily glanced at the car's sunroof. The two cars were probably a lot alike.

He did not stick around to hear the tiny whirring noise coming from Plot #60. Nor did he ever see the ridiculously fat diamond left at the edge of the grave, as payment. A Forest Lawn worker, finding it later in the day and assuming it to be a cheap crystal because of its large size, took it to his Pasadena apartment and hung it in the kitchen window,

## Pinewood

Tanith Lee

*Born in north London in September, 1947, Tanith Lee had her first book, The Dragon Hoard, published fifteen years ago. Since that time she has become one of the field's most popular authors, with some thirty books of fantasy and science fiction for adults and another ten or so for young readers—this in addition to short stories, radio plays, and two scripts for Blake's Seven. Lee's most recent books include a science fiction novel, Days of Grass; a DAW Books reissue of two of her MacMillan novels, Dark Castle, White Horse; a fourth novel in her Flat Earth series, Delirium's Mistress; and a collection of stories, Night's Daughter. Just finished, a major historical novel set during the French Revolution.*

CLEAR MORNING LIGHT slanted across her face and woke her. She turned on her side and murmured:

“David. David, darling, I think it must be awfully late—”

Receiving no answer, she opened her eyes. The other side of the bed was empty, and the little clock on his side table showed half past ten. Of course, he had woken when the alarm went off, as she never did, and left her to sleep. The clock's little round face, like cracked eggshell, ticked with a menacing reproach. She had always been certain it disliked her, in a humorous rather than a sinister manner, because she never responded to its insistent morning screams, and when David was away on business, forgot to wind it up.

Beyond the bright window the pines rubbed their black needles against the autumn wind. She shivered as she sat up in the bed. The gothic trees disturbed her, a stupid notion for a woman of thirty-seven, she told herself.

Dear David. She brushed her teeth with swift meticulous strokes. He alone had never minded about her sluggish waking.

She examined her eyes and her throat in the harsh light, bravely. Not so bad. Not so bad, Pamela, for the elderly lady you are. She smiled as she ran the bath, thinking of her anxious questionings, her painful jokes:

"I'm not too old for you, darling, really. People will ask you at parties why you brought your mother—" in reality she was three years David's senior—and the batch of youthful snaps: "Oh, but I look so young in these—" He was good to her, sensing the nervous, helpless steps she took toward that essentially, prematurely female precipice of age—the little line, the gray hair. He told her all the things she wanted to hear from him, all the good things, and never seemed to find her tiresome. He had always had a perfect patience and kindness toward her. And she had always known that she had been unusually lucky with this man. She might so easily have loved a fool or a boor and found out too late, as had Jane, or her sister Angela, a man with no ability to imagine how things might be for the female principal in his life—a lack of comprehension amounting to xenophobia.

Sitting in the bath she had a sudden horror that this was the day for Mrs. Meadowes, the cleaning lady. A twice-weekly visitation of utter cleanliness and vigor, she nevertheless doted on David, and, naturally, bullied Pamela. Frantically Pamela toweled and scattered talc. She never seemed to know where she was with Mrs. Meadowes. Her days and times of arrival seemed to be in constant flux. And now, come to think of it, Pamela remembered she was to meet David for lunch.

She grasped the phone and dialed the Meadowes' number. An incoherent child answered, presently to be replaced by a recognized contralto.

"Oh—Mrs. Meadowes, Pamela Taylor here—I'm dreadfully sorry, but I simply couldn't remember—is it today you're coming? Or is it tomorrow or something?"

There was a pause, then the contralto said carefully:

"Well, dear, I can fit you in tomorrow. If you like."

"Oh, good, then it wasn't today. Thank you so much. Sorry to have bothered you. Goodbye."

There had been something distinctly strange about the Meadowes phone call, she thought as she ate her grapefruit. Probably something to do with that appalling child. She switched on the radio. She caught a news bulletin, as she always seemed to do. Somewhere a plane had crashed, somewhere else an earthquake—she switched off. Angela had frequently told her that she should keep herself abreast of the news, not bury her head in the sand. But she simply could not stand it. Papers depressed her. They came for David, and when he forgot to take them with him to the office as he always seemed to nowadays, she would push them out of sight, bury them behind cushions and under piles of

magazines, afraid to glimpse some horror before she could avert her eyes. David teased her a little. "Where's the ostrich hidden my paper today?"

As she constructed her peach-bloom cosmetic face before the mirror she thought of Angela, vigorously devouring black gospels of famine, war, and pestilence with her morning coffee. James liked her to know what she was talking about at their dinner parties. He rated a woman's intelligence by her grasp of foreign correspondents and yesterday in parliament. It was in a way rather curious. Angela had met James in the same month Pamela had met David.

She took the car with her into town, a feat she performed with some dread. David was a superb and relaxed driver, she by contrast, sat in rigid anxiety at the wheel. Her fears seemed to attract near disasters. Dogs, children, and India rubber balls flew in front of her wheels as if magnetized, men in Citroens honked and swore, and juggernauts herded her off the road. Normally she would take the bus, for David often used the car, but today it lurked in the garage, taunting her, and besides she was pushed for time. She reached the restaurant ten minutes late, and went to meet him in the bar, but he had not yet arrived. Bars were unfortunate for her, and alone she shunned them. David said she had a flair for being picked up; men who looked mafioso would offer her martinis, and all she seemed able to do in her paralyzed fright was apologize to them. She left the bar and went into the restaurant and ordered a sherry at her table.

The room felt rather hot and oppressive, and all the other tables were filling up, except her own. She drank her sherry down in wild gulps and the waiter leaned over her:

"Would madam care to order now?"

"Oh—no thank you. I'm sorry, you see, I'm waiting for my husband—"

She trailed off. A knowing and somber look had come over the man's face. "Oh, God, I suppose he thinks I'm a whore, too." She took out a cigarette and smoked it in nervous bursts. She could see another waiter watching her from his post beside a pillar. "I shall wait another ten minutes and then I shall go."

It was fifteen minutes past two when she suddenly remembered. It came over her like a lightning flash, bringing a wave of embarrassment and relief in its wake. Of course, David had told her very last thing last night that the lunch would have to be canceled. A man was coming from Kelly's—or Ryson's—and he would have to take him for a working snack at the pub. She felt an utter fool. Good heavens, was her memory going this early? She almost giggled as she threaded between the tables.

She shopped in the afternoon, and ate a cream cake with her coffee



in a small teashop full of old ladies. She had bought David a novel, one of the few Graham Greene's he hadn't collected over the years. She had seen for some time that he was having trouble with his present reading—the same volume had lain beside the round-faced clock for over a month.

The journey home was relatively uneventful. At the traffic lights a boy with a rucksack leaned to her window. She thought in alarm that he was going to demand a lift, or else tell her in an American voice of how he had found Jesus in San Francisco, but, in fact, he only wanted directions to Brown's the chemists. It seemed such a harmless request it filled her with incongruous delight. Purple and ocher cloud drift was bringing on the early dusk in spasms of rain. With a surge of immeasurable compassion she offered him, after all, the lift she had been terrified of giving. David would be furious with her, she knew. It was a stupid thing to do, yet the boy looked so vulnerable in the rain, his long dark hair plastered to his skull. He was an ugly, shy, rather charming student, and she left him at the chemists after a ten-minute ride during which he thanked her seven times. It turned out his mother was Mrs. Brown, and he had hitched all the way from Bristol.

After he had gone, she parked the car, and went to buy fresh cigarettes. Coming from the tobacconists, she saw the cemetery.

She had forgotten she would see the cemetery on her errand of mercy. It was foolish, she knew, to experience this "morbid dread," as Angela would no doubt put it. It was, nevertheless, a perfect picture of horror for her—the ranks of marble markers under the orange monochrome sky with rain falling on their plots and withered wreaths, and down through the newly-turned soil to reach the wooden caskets underneath. . . . She experienced a sudden swirling sickness, and ran through it to the car. Inside, the icy rain shut out, she found that she had absurdly begun to cry.

"Oh, don't be such an idiot," she said aloud.

She turned on the car's heater, and started vigorously for home, nearly stalling. She was much later than she had meant to be.

There were no lights burning in the house, and she realized with regret that he would be late again. She coerced the unwilling car into the garage, and ran between the rustling pines. She clicked a switch in every room and resuscitated the television to reveal three children up to their eyes in some form of super sweet. Their strawberry-and-cream bedecked faces filled her with disgust. She had never liked children, and never wanted them. She paused, her hand on the door, a moment's abstracted thought catching at her mind—had she failed David in this? She could remember him saying to her as she sobbed against him:

"I only want you, you know that, and nothing else matters."

That had been after the results of the tests. In a way she felt she had wished herself into barrenness. She thought of Angela's two sons, strapping boisterous boys, who went canoeing with their father, and brought home baskets of mangled catch from a day's fishing, and spotted trains, and bolted their food to get back to incongruous and noisy activities in their bedroom.

"A man needs sons," Angela had once said. "It's a sort of proof, Pamela. Why don't you see a specialist? I can give you the address."

But then Angela and James had not slept together in any sense for ten years, Pamela thought with sudden, spiteful triumph, and it had always been a doubtful joy to them. She remembered David's arms about her and that earthy magic they made between them, an attraction that had increased rather than diminished.

The phone rang.

It made her jump.

"Oh, damn."

She picked it up, and heard, with the relevance of a conjuration, her sister's cool, well-managed tones.

"Oh, hullo, Angela. I don't want to be a cow, but this really is rather a bad time—I was just about to start dinner—"

"Pamela, my dear," Angela said, her voice peculiarly solemn, "are you all right?"

"All right? Of course I am. What on earth—"

"Pamela, I want you to listen to me. Please, my dear. I wouldn't have rung, but Jane Thomson says she saw you in Cordells at lunch time. She says, oh, my dear, she says she saw you waiting for someone." Angela sounded unspeakably distressed. "Pamela, who were you waiting for?"

Pamela felt a surge of panic wash over her.

"I—oh, no one. Does it matter?"

"Darling, of course it does. Was it David you were waiting for, like the last time?"

Pamela held the phone away from her ear and looked at it. There was a bee trapped in the phone, buzzing away at her. She had always been terribly afraid of bees.

"I really have to go, Angela," she shouted at the mouthpiece.

"Oh, Pamela, Pamela," Angela said. She seemed to be crying. "Darling, David can't come back to you. Now now."

"Be quiet," Pamela said.

The bee went on buzzing.

“Pamela, listen to me. David is dead. Dead, do you hear me? He died of peritonitis last July. For God’s sake, Pamela—”

Pamela dropped the phone into its receiver and the buzzing stopped.

The dinner was spoiled before she realized how late he was going to be after all. He had told her the conference might run on, and not to wait up for him. She waited, however, until midnight. Upstairs, she took the book from the bedside table and replaced it with the Graham Greene—it would surprise him when he found it.

She hated to sleep without him, but she was very tired. And she would see him in the morning.

Outside, the pines clicked and whispered, but she did not listen.

# The Night People

Michael Reaves

*Born in 1950 in San Bernardino, California, Michael Reaves currently resides in Woodland Hills (close enough to Los Angeles to commute and far enough to avoid the smog). He attended Clarion in 1972 and made his first sale to Clarion III. Since then Reaves has sold a dozen or so short stories to places like Twilight Zone Magazine and Fantasy & Science Fiction—as well as ten novels, including Darkworld Detective, The Shattered World, and Hellstar (the last with Steve Perry). This is in addition to well over a hundred teleplays—mostly Saturday morning animations—but including scripts for such shows as The Twilight Zone. His latest books are “a fantasy noir called Street Magic” from Tor and a sequel to The Shattered World. Reaves and rising fantasy star Steve Perry are also working on a film for Catalina Productions called The Omega Cage, based on their forthcoming novel.*

THINGS HAD NOT changed that much. I found a basement single in one of those old brick-and-black-iron buildings downtown, just off Evangeline, near the Underground City. It was \$275 a month for two rooms, a Murphy bed, and a refrigerator that rattled like a snake. There were only three wall outlets and most of the windows were painted shut, but it also had a tiny fold-down desk, a built-in bookshelf, and space for an easel. The whole place was very small, but that did not matter.

It was not a quiet building; there were children, and the landlady in the apartment upstairs communed with God regularly and enthusiastically. That didn't matter either. I bought a stereo cassette player with headphones and wore soft-wax earplugs when I slept, which was often past noon. I had realized at least one lifelong, though minor, desire: after years of rising at dawn, I was now staying up as late as three or four A.M. I had become a night person.

I adjusted to it surprisingly easily. When I awoke, I would exercise; a garage sale had provided me with a bench and some weights. I found an old mailbag in a trash bin behind the post office, filled it with rags and

beans and rice, and hung it from one of the many water pipes that crisscrossed the ceiling. I would beat on it regularly; I had no particular skill, but it helped, along with pushing weights, to discharge some of the tension that had built up during the past few months. The pipes were also very useful for chin-ups and vertical sit-ups. After an hour or so of that, I would paint—as much as ten hours straight sometimes except for meals. To save money I made an easel and mixed my own pigments in the sunlit alley behind the building.

Despite extensive use of drop clothes, flecks of paint stippled the walls and the old hardwood floors, and the kitchen sink was soon stained with a dark rainbow. I opened what windows I could and bought an ancient, clattering fan, but the pungent smells of paint, thinner, and linseed oil were still almost overpowering. I lived in dread of a surprise visit from the landlady, who already viewed me with suspicion due to the Justin Courtenay prints I had hung on one wall. There were two of them: *The Night People* and *Eros Exotica*, his most famous works. The former's street scene alone, with its Bosch-like decadence and surreal evil, must have immediately labeled me in her mind as a devil worshipper, and as for the latter—I'm surprised she did not attempt to have me evicted.

When my vision would blur from eyestrain and fumes, I would go out. Sometimes I would sit at a tiny wrought-iron table in one of the jazz clubs on King Snake Road, nursing a drink and listening to horns scorching the blue air; mostly I would just wander the streets and watch the colorful pirate parade of night life. Like a vampire, I now seemed to feel fully alive only after dark. I visited my old neighborhoods and haunted, reliving scenes from my childhood that had faded to sere daguerreotypes from memory. I tried to feel something, anything, and couldn't.

I was back in New Delphi, the city where I'd been born. But I wasn't home.

It had been ten years, not counting two visits to my parents after they had moved to Blessed Shoals. I had long since lost touch with those few friends I had made in high school and four years of art school. Perhaps, I told myself, I would look them up. There was no hurry—we tend to think of people left behind as being frozen in time's ice, waiting patient and unchanged. Perhaps I would see them eventually. But for now there was to be nothing but work.

Samantha had been a night person; the times we retired together in Los Angeles had been rare. I was always asleep by twelve at the latest, while she rarely closed her eyes before four A.M. A few times we would

pass each other in that gray, still time just before dawn—she on her way to bed, I to put in a few hours at the light board before hitting the gym.

Maybe the difference in our circadian rhythms was a sign of basic incompatibility. I should have heeded from the beginning, but initially, in fact, I found it charming. I envied Samantha; I had always longed to be a night person, had always thought it a badge of creativity. Many of our friends were writers, artists, or musicians, and did most of their work in those quiet, neon-lit hours.

But to me the land that lay beyond midnight was an immense *terra incognita*. I had forced myself to stay awake all night a number of times, and each had left me feeling like the walking dead for days afterward. At last I had accepted my diurnal nature; regretfully, for I viewed the night as a separate, magical world, and longed to be part of it. I never felt quite right about working to the prosaic sounds of car engines warming and garbage cans rattling, rather than to a mysterious romantic silence broken only by an occasional siren or police helicopter.

In one respect, the split shift that Samantha and I lived was advantageous; we could only afford a two bedroom apartment, which meant that one room had to serve as both her office and my studio. I think that, had we labored in that small area at the same time, what happened between us would have happened much sooner. We were both at the same stage in our careers; I had sold several paintings and lithographs and been shown in some of the trendier galleries along Melrose Avenue, while she had placed a dozen short stories in small-press magazines and anthologies and was working on a novel. We supported ourselves by freelancing for animation studios which produced children's cartoons for Saturday morning television. She wrote the scripts and I drew the storyboards. It paid very well; three months' work let us spend the rest of the year on our own labors of love.

I met Samantha by calling to compliment her on a script she had written, one which I was boarding. Six months later we were living together; exactly one year after that, to the day, I left Los Angeles.

Samantha and I had become lovers before we had become friends, and only later discovered that, despite appearances, we had nothing in common. There was a gulf between us that was far wider, far deeper, than the difference between day and night. Looking too long and too deeply into that gulf—that, and not the petty bourgeois bickering we had constantly engaged in, had been our mistake. It had driven me away from Los Angeles, which, despite its night life, is a city of harsh brightness, a land where people drive miles beneath a desert sun to visit tanning

parlors. It had brought me back to New Delphi, the epitome of the Deep South, a true city of night, surrounded by pre-Cambrian bayous. Magic still lived here, and here I could, I hoped, put down on canvas what I had left behind, before it was too late.

I had been there nearly a month when I turned thirty. No doubt in reaction, I rose early and worked out long and hard that day, beating the bag, jumping rope and lifting weights until every joint and muscle ached and the windows were fogged. My usual schedule was to follow this with a blenderful of fruit, brewer's yeast, protein powder, and bran, and then to start mixing colors. Instead, I took a walk.

It was a bright spring day, the air already hinting at the approaching summer warmth and humidity. I thought briefly about how intolerable my rabbit-hole would be and how it would affect the painting if I did not somehow find the money for an air conditioner. I think it was the first time I had let my thoughts venture more than a week into the future since I had moved.

The crowds seemed larger and slower-moving. Though full of variety, they were drab compared to the perennial Mardi Gras ensemble that filled the streets after dark. There were more cars with out-of-state plates; tourist season was beginning.

I had not been outside before dusk in nearly two weeks. The afternoon sun was giving me a headache, despite the mirrored sunglasses I wore. I decided suddenly to take the Underground City tour. It had been nearly fifteen years since I had last seen it, but I remembered it very well. The thought of the cool, damp brick streets, the deserted storefronts and houses spotlighted by lightbulbs, and most of all the quiet, was very appealing. I bought a ticket and joined the tour group that was already descending the concrete steps.

The tour was composed mostly of fat men in loud shirts and hats advertising beer brands or truck companies, and women whose purpose in life was to bat futilely at crying children. I walked slowly, dropping behind them all, paying no attention to the tour guide's cheery speech about the Thanksgiving Day Battle of 1864 in which Union soldiers had put the entire downtown area to the torch. New buildings had eventually been built on top of the old, leaving the fire-gutted ruins to molder in darkness until the city fathers had decided in 1957 to restore them as a tourist attraction.

I was surprised at how accurately I remembered it; particularly Alastair Street, the infamous artists' colony. Even as a child I had been fascinated with its history. Here such authors as Bierce, Brochensen,

Dedric, and even Poe had lived or visited in antebellum times. In 1849, while living in a small garret overlooking the square, Marnauk had composed *The Executioner's Daughter*, an opera considered at the time so savagely perverse that there had been talk of deporting him. It was in his Alastair Studio that Courtenay had painted his two most controversial works, and also such masterpieces as *Images in Stone and Flame*. Every other doorway along the narrow, twisting length had been rumored to hide an opium den or a Satanic church. The colony had lived on in various imaginations after the fire: in the 1930s *Weird Tales* had published the lurid "Alastor Street" stories of Westin James, a pulp writer of the Lovecraft coterie. There had been a Roger Corman movie and even a rock album during the Sixties, all inspired by the legends of Alastair Street.

I walked along the rebuilt wooden sidewalks, looking into houses and stores. Some interiors had been outfitted with displays in an attempt to recapture the stilted past. I leaned against the four-paned window of Courtenay's studio and looked at the mannequin within, stiffly posed in oil-daubed smock, palette in one hand and brush in the other. A statue of a young female model, discreetly draped in a robe, reclined on a nearby hassock. The exhibit was staged so that one could not glimpse the painting on Courtenay's easel, but the pose of the model—if not the bland features—suggested *Eros Exotica*. The scene was the beginning of his work on it, of course; good taste would have prevented the designers of the tour from even hinting at the final stages. The choice of paintings was appropriate. *Eros Exotica* had been Courtenay's last work, finished only a day before the Union Army had attacked. The artist had died in the fire, and yet he was here, frozen in time by the strength of his art and the memory of others. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath of stale air, and thought about the black waters of Devil's Bay, only a few miles away.

When I opened my eyes again, the model had moved.

I stared in surprise. The hassock was near the fireplace, where the red light reflecting off crumpled foil looked vaguely like logs ablaze. The model leaned forward and stretched, then looked toward the window. I saw her face quite clearly, white as fresh-cut pine, with delicate bones. Her eyes were violet. They went wide with surprise—and fear—when she saw me. Then she stood, wrapping the robe about her, and was quickly gone into the darkness of another room.

I heard footsteps behind me.

"Will you please keep up with the group, sir?"

The tour guide was about ten years younger than I and politely stern, like an airline stewardess trying to convince someone to fasten a seat belt. The group waited several pools of light down the street. I felt oddly



contrite. The astonishing scene I had just witnessed, and the calm unreality of the city itself, made my transgression seem somehow more serious than it was.

"I'm sorry." I made a vague gesture toward the window. "There's someone in there."

"Quite possibly, sir. We have people working on these exhibits all the time."

"No, I mean the model in the exhibit—" I turned back toward the window, gesturing, and stopped, speechless. The model was still there, exactly as she had been posed before, unmistakably a construct of paint and plaster.

The guide turned and started back toward the rest of the group. I hesitated, then hurried forward and caught up with her. "I'm sorry—I'm not feeling too well . . ."

Her expression changed immediately to one of professional concern. This was a situation she knew how to deal with. "Of course, sir. This way." She took me back to the exit stairs, keeping up a solicitous monologue. I hardly heard a word of it. The face of the model stayed before me in the darkness of the Underground City. I knew I had seen her before.

Darkness had fallen; the Night People, as I thought of them, were out in force. I walked home quickly through the crowds, past street dancers and musicians, solicitors of both sexes, and others, paying little attention to the impromptu street parties and cheer that always filled the bright streets after sundown. My mood was difficult to describe; I was not so much concerned for my state of mind as I was preoccupied by the strength of the vision I had seen. It is, I understand, common among artists, whatever their fields, to place any shock or traumatic event safely within the boundaries of their work. Samantha had told me once that her first reaction, upon hearing of her husband's death, was to think of it as a dramatic scene in a novel or story. Actors and musicians I have known have confessed similar urges to sublimate terrible or frightening events in the contexts of their artistry. So it was now with me; I avoided thinking of what had just happened in terms of losing control, and concentrated instead upon the happening itself.

When I see something in a vivid moment of imagination—as I had thought I had seen the woman's face turning toward me in the studio—then it stays with me, and I tend to see it almost everywhere I look. Women whom I passed on my way back to my apartment, and female faces on billboard advertisements, all seemed to take on that same pale,

shocked look, that intense violet gaze. I studied the vision as I saw it in these many manifestations, and the more I saw it, the more I was convinced that I had seen the face before.

When I reached my room I opened *Images of Madness*, a large reference book on the works of Albright, Bosch, Munch, and others, including Courtenay. I found the detail from *Eros Exotica* and stared at it for quite some time. It was the same. The mannequin had been merely a department store sculpture, without even a superficial similarity to the painting; but the image before me now was that of the woman who had looked at me and fled the room. I had seen the luckless, nameless model Courtenay had used over a hundred years before in his most depraved—and most brilliant—creation.

As a child in New Delphi, I had entertained for many years the notion that night was a magic, timeless environment, in which past, present, and future were one and the same. Looking out from my window at the dark street, it was easy to imagine that pirates still docked in Devil's Bay, or that the shouts and cries I could occasionally faintly hear were the sounds of Union and Confederate soldiers fighting. The rising sun thawed time again, set it flowing once more, and restored order to the world. But at night, all times were one.

I had told Samantha once about this, hoping she would find the childish notion as charming as I did in memory. Instead, she had asked me how I explained the many evidences of the continued functioning of time after sundown, such as clocks ticking off the minutes until dawn. I had countered by asking how someone who wrote childrens' fantasies could be so literal-minded, and it had built from there into yet another fight.

And yet I was right, in an ironic sense. For I left her at night, at that time when she was most alive, and now she is suspended, frozen, no less than my childhood friends or Justin Courtenay himself.

I had chosen oil as my medium. Acrylic and watercolor dry too fast, and none of the other methods I had used in the past—etching, lithography, charcoal—seemed appropriate. I had started with the most somber shades and built up from them, trying to evoke the image from the darkness.

It had been hard, at first, keeping the room properly lit. As the sun moved across the sky, it was necessary to change the easel's position accordingly. The best time, I found, was twilight; in that brief stillness after sunset and before darkness, subtle shadings and interplays were

most visible to me. On occasion I would have to alter what I had done earlier. It was frustrating.

My hand would cramp from holding the palette, and the old coveralls I had bought at the Salvation Army crackled with dried paint. I wished I could continue working after dark, but the harsh artificial light destroyed all subtlety and delicacy. It was ironic: having finally become a night person I was now engaged in a project that could not be pursued after dark. Samantha would have laughed.

Though she had considered herself an intellectual and was quite well read, Samantha had known very little about art. What few concepts she had picked up she tended to state dogmatically, as if intensity made up for information. One of these was the tenet that an artist's visions grew more powerful as the artist slipped gradually into insanity. She would cite van Gogh's progression of self-portraits as an example. "The trouble with your art," she would tell me, "is that you're too sane. You need to set free your dark side." I was never sure how serious she was. At the time the critique had infuriated me; now I considered it perhaps the only thing worth salvaging from our relationship.

I had been working steadily on my painting since my return to New Delphi, but now, after my visit to the Underground City, I had stopped. My vision, so clear these past few weeks, had been obscured; Courtenay's model had come between me and the canvas.

For several days I tried to paint around it, to recall the memory I was trying to set down. It had not been that long ago, after all. But it was no use; I was no longer sure which face I saw. Courtenay's style and subject had been my inspiration this time, and now it was working against me. I had brought with me no photographs, no sketches; I had to rely on the purity of vision. I was feeling the pressure of time; I knew I could not count on being undisturbed for too much longer. At night I felt no time pass; I experienced only a calm, Zenlike *now*. But I could not paint at night. And the sun moved the days relentlessly.

I knew what I had to do. I had to return to the Underground City and somehow—I had no plan—learn who or what it was I had seen. Only by doing that would I be able to end my preoccupation, to see past her face and view the face in my painting clearly again.

I thought of waiting until nightfall to take advantage of whatever subtle magic the darkness might bring. But that was not necessary; it was always night in the Underground. I bought another ticket and descended the steps once more. It was easy to slip away from the group once we had reached Alastair Street, to hide in the darkness of a recessed doorway

until they were gone. Then I made my way down the narrow Parisian street to Courtenay's studio.

The mannequin of Courtenay still stood before his easel, studying the model's casual pose. I stared at the still life for what seemed an age, waiting for one or both of them to move. Nothing happened. I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes until bright green lights swirled in darkness. What was I doing? I was far too old to be chasing phantoms; I had been an artist far too long to justify blaming my failure to create on so absurd a concept as ghosts. I had to seek what reasons there were for my inability within that small apartment on Evangeline Street, not here in a city of the dead.

I opened my eyes—and saw that the model was gone.

The door was secured with an anachronistic padlock and hasp. I had to break the window with my shoe and carefully pick the shards of glass from the frame before I could vault into the studio. I was sure my action would bring a security guard or some other official, but there was no sound. In fact, I realized when I stopped to listen that the silence was perfect; I could no longer hear the faint voices of the tour group in the distance.

The model of Justin Courtenay stood calmly before me. This close, I could see that it was not a particularly inspired or maintained reproduction; the plaster tips of his fingers were chipped, and his eyes were the wrong color. I stepped around the easel to look at the canvas, and was not surprised to find it blank.

Oddly enough, I felt no worry over my forced entry, even though I knew what repercussions discovery could bring. Such concerns seemed remote, unreal, belonging to another age. I stepped through the far door the model had used for escape the previous time.

I don't know what I expected to find; what I found was a room filled with dusty boxes, crates, and stacks of partially dismembered nude mannequins. On the floor before me was a rumpled piece of white fabric with dark stains. The only light filtered dimly from the street. A rear door, barely visible, was partially open. Beyond it lay blackness.

It was at this point that I finally became afraid.

There was no hint of light beyond the door—and yet I knew, somehow, what was waiting in the darkness. I picked up the robe on the floor before me; the robe that the model had been wearing. It was still warm; the dark stains streaking it were still wet.

I looked at the door again. If she waited out there, it would not be as a plaster mannequin, nor as the frightened model I had seen in my

previous glimpse of this past. It would be as Courtenay had painted her, in his last, most powerful vision.

My mouth was dry. I could smell the cloying scent of pigments and oils—and something darker. I dropped the robe, turned and stepped quickly back into the studio.

The statue of Justin Courtenay was gone. The studio was empty, save for the furniture and the easel. No fire, real or simulated, burned in the fireplace. The painting upon the easel was *Eros Exotica*; the fresh pigments gleamed in the flickering light from the street gas lamps. I knew that if I touched it, it would be as wet as the bloodstains on the robe.

I stared at it, fascinated. It is one thing to view a reproduction of such a work, quite another to witness the vibrant original. Though I was familiar with every line, every nuance of it, still I stood, paralyzed with horror and admiration, at the genius of Courtenay's work. He had shown the same skill with the knife as with his brush. What in lesser hands would have been mere psychopathic barbarism had here been elevated to art—a sculpture of living flesh.

I tore my gaze from it and looked toward the window. It was unbroken. Through it I could see lights in other windows, and, above the buildings, a sky filled with stars as mad as van Gogh's.

The Night People walked the street.

I could see them quite clearly—women in bustled silk dresses, men with muttonchops and canes. These were the real Night People, I knew, the ones upon whom Courtenay had based his famous work. They sauntered casually through the evening air of Alastair Street, nodding and tipping hats to each other. I recognized the dark, brooding face of Edgar Allan Poe as he stopped to speak to a gentleman who could be none other than Ambrose Bierce. This was impossible, of course—Poe had died of debauchery while Bierce was still a child. I watched Sara Eaton, her skin as white as the marble she sculpted, strolling proudly with her lover, the ballerina Anastasia Cyril. From an upstairs window a whore leaned, her bare breasts polished by the gaslight, and waved at prospective customers. Egan Marnauk and Miguel Gaspar, Goya's only disciple, stumbled drunkenly across the street in pursuit of a girl barely in her teens. They had no more been contemporaries on Alastair Street, I knew, than had Bierce and Poe. I saw other artists, famous and infamous, some acquaintances of those about them, others separated by years or decades. But all walked Alastair Street this night.

There was no sound; even the carriages and horses on the cobblestones were silent. And then I heard a noise behind me.

I turned and saw her emerging from the night beyond the second floor,

her face still in darkness, the blood running like shadows over her body. I heard again the drops hitting the floor. She took another step, and her face became visible. When I saw it, I screamed.

I ran from the studio into the midst of the Night People. Though they were all about me, I collided with none of them, and they took no notice of me at all. I broke through them and ran. Alastair Street stretched before me, endless, serpentine . . .

"Set free your dark side," she told me, more than once. Our quarrels, as I have said, had been dry and intellectual for the most part—at first. But we both had gradually descended into that gulf between us, accusing each other of darker things, things worse than infidelity and uncaring, worse even than disparaging each other's talent. For at the bottom of that gulf lay madness—the ultimate artistic goal. And we had come to suspect each other of it; and from there, to encourage it.

I don't know how long it took me to reach the steps that rose to the surface streets. At one point I heard shouting behind me, glimpsed one of the Underground City's security personnel running after me. Perhaps they had seen me break the glass. I did not stop running.

It was night, of course, when I emerged. In Xavier Square the crowds were thick and varied: teenagers with spiked hair and tattooed cheeks; gays in leather, handcuffs locked on their belts; brightly-colored prostitutes. Their pervasive decadence seemed nothing, somehow, when I compared them with the sedate strollers I had seen. And yet they were the same; as I stumbled home, it seemed I could glimpse among the crowds gentlemen in ascots and bowlers, and ladies veiled in lace. It was the same endless night I had seen on Alastair Street—the same night in which I had left Samantha.

I had succeeded in my purpose, at least, though not in the way I had intended. The face that had emerged from the shadows in the studio had not been that of Courtenay's model. Instead, I had seen what I needed to see to finish.

When I reached my studio, I did not turn on the lights. I opened the curtains, letting moonlight flood in. They say that not even the light of a full moon is enough to discern colors by, yet even so, the pigments were more vivid to me than ever before. I tore the canvas I had worked on so long from the board, and stapled a new one to the stretcher bars. Each shade and color seemed almost luminous as I set to work.

Since this night was the same as all nights, then it would also be the night in which they found me. But I knew that this would not happen until the last stroke was laid. And I was right; it was not until I laid the brush down that I heard the knock on the door, the gruff identification.

I took down Courtenay's prints; they had served their purpose. I did not answer the knock. The landlady let them in at last and turned on the light. I had to shut my eyes against its glare, and so was unable to see their reaction. I could hear their gasps, of horror and disgust, however; could hear the landlady turn and run from the room. It was only then that the relief, the release, which I had been seeking for so long flooded over me. An artist's work is incomplete, after all, until it is experienced by others.

I smiled at them. "I call it *Samantha in the Night*," I said.

## Ceremony

William F. Nolan

*William F. Nolan has written some 45 books, 90 short stories, numerous teleplays and screenplays, and something like a thousand essays, articles and reviews. Despite all this, Nolan is best known to science fiction and fantasy fans as the co-author (with George Clayton Johnson) of Logan's Run. Perhaps this is because Nolan's far-ranging enthusiasms have spread his output over too many genres. For example, his most recent output: a book on Max Brand, a book on hard-boiled detective fiction (The Black Mask Boys), a collection of horror stories (Things Beyond Midnight), and an NBC Movie-of-the-Week about Jack the Ripper (Bridge Across Time).*

*Born March 6, 1928 in Kansas City, Nolan has lived in the Los Angeles area since 1953, where he has written full-time since 1956. His first science fiction book, a collection of stories entitled Impact 20, was published in 1963. He is author or editor of several other books in this genre, as well as the compiler of the annotated bibliography, The Ray Bradbury Companion. His stories have appeared in more than 120 anthologies, but this is his first appearance in The Year's Best Horror Stories. "Ceremony" was inspired by a forced bus ride to Providence, Rhode Island where he attended a World Fantasy Convention. Nolan feels that it is his best story: "For me, it is the end product of thirty years of pro fiction." Have a look.*

HE HATED RIDING cross-country in a bus almost as much as he hated driving cross-country, but the problem was he'd missed his rail connection getting into Chicago and just couldn't wait for the next train. He *had* to be in Providence by Thursday evening to meet the Sutter woman. So it was the bus or nothing.

Mrs. Sutter was leaving that same night for Europe, and when she returned she expected her husband to be dead. The contract had to be settled before she left and the advance paid him. He didn't ice rich, unfaithful husbands unless he was well paid for the job, half down, the



other half after the hit. Funny part of this one, he would have done old Sutter for *free*. Because of the total. He'd dispatched 13 people (would joke sometimes about "working as a dispatcher") since he'd gone into this business and he needed to break the total.

It wasn't that he was superstitious. Never had been. But, in plain, hard truth, that damned number 13 was unlucky for him. No question about it. He was 13 the time his father had split out for good, when they were living in that crummy, red-brick, coldwater flat in St. Louis. Not that he loved his old man. Not that bum. It was just that his father was usually able to keep his mother from beating the crap out of him. She beat him senseless twice that week, after the old man had split. Took it out on him. Way she took everything out on him. Always had. He was missing three teeth because of her. Good ole Mom.

That was the same week he ran off to Kansas City and got a job as a stacker in a paper-box factory after lying about his age. He'd looked a lot older than 13.

Then there was a double-13 on the license plate of that big, pink Lincoln convertible the blonde had driven when he'd hitched into Boulder City a few winters back. The blonde had been fun, sure, but she was coked out of her gourd when she flipped the car on a hairpin turn in the mountains and almost killed both of them. She thought it was funny, having a double-13 on her plates. Yeah, funny.

And, in Nam, there was a transport number, 13-something, painted on the tail of that lousy chopper that went down in the rice paddy. He'd been sent back to the States after that, with a Purple Heart, but the crash had killed his best buddy—the one real friend he'd ever trusted. He didn't trust people as a general rule. People screwed you up when you trust them. But he'd trusted Eddie . . .

There had been a lot of 13s in his life, all tied into hard times, bad breaks, heavy losses. And now, by Christ, his *job* total was 13. Bad luck. But Mr. Sutter would make it fourteen and everything would be okay again. Life was fine, so long as he stayed away from the 13s.

"The bus will get you into Providence by late Thursday afternoon," the train clerk had assured him in Chicago. "But it's a long trip. Rather exhausting. We'd suggest a flight."

"I don't take planes," he told the clerk. He didn't tell him why.

It wasn't the chopper crash in Nam. Not that. It was the dream. About a commercial airliner, a big 747. Falling, with him strapped inside, staring out the window. Going down fast, people screaming, a jet engine on fire with the right wing burning. Paint cracking and peeling in the

fierce heat, with the flames eating at a number on the trailing edge of the wing. A number ending in 13.

The *one* job he'd had trouble with, killing Wendl, that banker in Tucson, when a piss-ass schoolkid had seen him come out of Wendl's house after the job and called the cops, *that* one had been the 13th. He originally planned it for the fourteenth, but when he found out Wendl's family was returning from their trip a day early, he was forced to make the hit. But never again. No more jobs on the 13th, no matter *how* much he got paid. He'd learned a lesson there, in Arizona. Cops had almost nailed him for sure.

So now he was on a bus in late October, heading for Providence, Rhode Island, ready to eliminate Mr. James T. Sutter at the personal request of his loving wife, Jennifer. He'd get the advance from Mrs. S. and spend a week in Providence, then ice the old fart before taking a train back to the Coast.

Bringing his job total to fourteen.

He grinned, closing his eyes . . .

. . . and woke with a jolt, feeling cold glass strike his forehead. He'd nodded off, lulled by the rocking motion of the bus, and his head had bumped the window. He straightened, coughing, and wiped a small trickle of saliva from his chin. That's how it was on a long bus ride, with those fat tires hypnotically thrumming on the road, setting up a measured vibration in your body, making you drowsy. Your eyelids get heavy, slide down; your mouth gapes, and you doze. And wake. And blink. And doze again.

Time is meaningless. You don't know where you are, what town you're passing through. Don't care. Your back aches, and your feet are swollen inside your shoes. Your clothes itch, tight and sweaty around you. You smoke, but the cigarettes taste sour.

Hours of travel along strange highways, suspended in a surreal vacuum between night cities and day cities, looking blankly out at hills and rivers and passing traffic, chewing on stale Clark bars from paint-chipped vending machines in musty-smelling depots. Riding endlessly through country you'd never seen and never wanted to see.

It was early afternoon on Highway 95. Sun half down along a rolling horizon of green hills. They'd just crossed the state line from Connecticut. He'd seen the big sign with a girl's smiling face painted on it . . .

WELCOME TO RHODE ISLAND!

A Nice Place Visit.

A NICER Place to Live.

He suddenly remembered a song he'd heard when he was very young. His old man had this classic recording of the Andrews Sisters—Patty, Laverne and somebody—singing energetically about “poor little Rhode Island, smallest of the forty-eight . . .” There had been only forty-eight states when the Andrews Sisters had made the record, and he remembered feeling sorry for the place. He'd been a little kid, shorter than most of his schoolmates, and he identified with smallness. One summer he'd found an abandoned pup, a real little guy, obviously the runt of the litter, and had taken it home. But his mother strangled it. She didn't like pets.

Poor little Rhode Island . . .

They were passing through farm country in the western part of the state. Lots of big rocks, with dirt-and-gravel roads branching off into fields (what were they growing?—he sure as hell didn't know) and with pale white Colonial farmhouses off in the distance. He spotted some apple orchards, and there were plenty of elm and oak trees along the road, all fire-colored. Like passing a circus. He wasn't much for scenery, but this was special—New England in October, putting on a class show for the customers.

How many hours had it been since they'd left Chicago? Twenty, at a guess. At least that long. It seemed like weeks, riding these endless gray highways.

The bus was nearly empty. Just him in the back section and an elderly couple up front. It had been crowded at first—but people kept getting off. More at each depot stop. Finally, it was just the three of them and the driver. Well, nobody in his right mind rode a bus for twenty hours. But it was almost over. Not long now into Providence.

He closed his eyes again, let the singing tires take him into sleep.

He woke to darkness. Thick black Rhode Island night outside the glass, an interior dark inside the bus. He'd been jarred awake by rough road under the wheels. Narrow and bumpy. Why had they left the main highway? Jesus! He'd been due into Providence before dark.

He got up numbly, bracing himself against the seat back, then walked forward unsteadily along the aisle past the elderly couple (godawful bony-looking people) until he reached the driver.

“Where are we?” he asked, squinting into the night. “Why aren't we on 95?”

The driver was a thin character, with gaunt, stretched skin. He stared

intently ahead at the narrow road, illuminated in floury-white patches by the probing lights. "Sorry, buddy, I had no choice."

"What's *that* mean? How late are we going to be getting into Providence?"

"Won't be there till morning," said the driver. "You'll have to spend tonight at the Mill. We'll be coming in soon. Maybe another ten minutes."

"The hell you say!" He leaned over to grip the driver's thin shoulder. "Turn this thing around and get us back on the main highway! I'm due in Providence tonight, and by God you'd better get me there!"

"No can do, buddy. Engine's fouled up. Overheating real bad. May be the carburetor, dunno. Only place to get 'er fixed is at Doour's Mill. They got a garage there. You ask me, lucky we made it this far. Gotta admit it sure beats being stuck someplace out on the road."

"Is there a phone at the garage?"

"Oh, sure. You can call from the Mill. No problem."

He started back toward the rear of the bus, thinking it's 13 again. *That's* why this job has gone sour. He checked his watch. Damn! Won't do any good to call Providence now. She's gone. Off to sunny Italy. Figured it for a chicken job; figured I didn't want the contract. She'll hire it out later, after she gets back.

Unlucky.

Okay, he told himself, ease down. You can score another contract in New York. Just have to put off going back to the Coast for a while. Plenty of action in New York. He had some good contacts there. He'd make it fourteen in New York. Just relax. What's done is done. Don't fight it.

"Happy Holiday!" said the couple, one after the other, both saying it to him as he passed them on the way to his seat.

He paused, gripping an upper handrail as the bus shuddered over a deep cut in the gravel road. "Uh, yeah . . . same to you."

When he reached his seat in the SMOKING PERMITTED section, he slumped down heavily, got out his cigarettes. Dead pack. He tossed it away, dug out a fresh one. He lit a Salem, drew in smoke, sighed, settled back into the cushion.

He'd forgotten; tonight was Halloween! This was it, all right, October 31st. As a kid, it had been his favorite holiday.

He never got presents for Christmas, or for his birthday, and Easter was a drag. But Halloween was nothing but great—the *one* night in the year when people *gave* you things. Free candy . . . cake . . . apples . . . doughnuts . . .

He smiled, remembering.

The bus lurched to a creaking stop. Doors hissed open.

They were at the garage, a weathered building with light seeping from its fogged windows. A dented Ford pickup was parked in front with the words HARLEY'S REPAIR SERVICE painted on the side.

"All out, folks! Doour's Mill."

He stepped down onto the gravel roadway. The driver was helping the elderly couple from the bus. They moved slowly, cautiously, their bones like breakable china. That's how you get if you stick around long enough, he thought.

The garage owner, Harley, began talking to the driver. Very tall, in baggy trousers and a torn denim work jacket. Then the driver came around to open the luggage door on the bus.

He reached in for his travel bag. Light, compact, good leather. Had it custom-made to fit his needs. With a hidden compartment for the short-barrel .357 Magnum. Sweet piece of equipment. He'd started with a Browning .380 automatic, but he'd never trusted it. The Mag he trusted. Always got the job done. Easy to carry, with a real kick to it.

"You wanna use the phone, one's right inside."

"No, it's too late now. Forget it. There a cafe around here?"

"Straight ahead. Two blocks up. If it's open."

"Thanks." He checked his watch. Nine-thirty. "What time do we leave in the morning?"

"Be here by six," said the driver. "She'll be ready to roll by then."

"Okay."

He passed the dim-lit garage. In the smoked gloom, standing next to a high-piled stack of discarded truck tires, a lean, unshaven mechanic in greased blood-dark coveralls stared out at him.

He continued along the street. The gravel gave way to concrete, but the ground was still uneven. Tufted grass spiked up from wide cracks in the surface. The ancient Victorian houses along the street were in equal disrepair, their gabled bay windows cracked and shadowed. Porches sagged. Roofs seemed hunched against the night. Doour's Mill had gone to seed, a time-worn New England relic of a town that seemed totally deserted.

It wasn't. A pair of teenagers, holding hands, came toward him, heads together, talking quietly. They looked underfed. The girl had no figure at all. "Happy Holiday," they said to him as they passed.

He didn't answer them. No point in it. Terrific town for a holiday.

He had no trouble finding the cafe. It was the only building along the main street with a neon sign. MA'S PLACE. Reminded him of his mother. He didn't like that. When he got closer, he saw that the first two letters had burned out. It was ALMA'S PLACE. Several other letters in the sign

were dying, slowly dimming, flickering and buzzing in the air above his head like trapped insects.

He opened the door, stepped inside.

He was the only customer.

The waitress behind the worn linoleum counter was obviously young, but she looked like an anorexic. Pasty skin. Long, bony face with watery brown eyes. She blinked at him. "Hi, mister."

He said hello, asked if she was serving hot food.

"Sure, till ten o'clock we do. I mean, no steaks or specials this late, but I can fix you some eggs."

"Okay, that'll do. Scrambled easy, with hash browns and wheat toast."

"Easy it is," she said, and walked back to the kitchen to fix his order.

He sat down on one of the counter stools, laid his travel bag over another, and glanced idly around. A few greenish-colored tables, some crooked wooden chairs, an old broken-faced jukebox in one corner. Dark, not working. Near the antique cash register somebody had tacked a paper plate to the wall. On it, scrawled in black crayon: HAPPY HALLOWEEN!

He chuckled. They can't even spell Halloween in this godforsaken town.

The waitress ambled out of the kitchen with eggs and toast. "Sorry, no more hash brown," she said. "But I can give you some sliced tomatoes. As a substitute, no extra charge. Not too fresh, though."

"This'll be all right," he told her. "With coffee."

She nodded, pouring him a cup. "It's kinda strong. You use cream?"

"No."

"Well, it's kinda strong."

"It'll be fine," he said, spooning sugar into the cup.

"I hope the toast is okay. I tried not to burn it."

"It's fine," he said.

He began to eat. One thing you can order safely in a joint like this, he told himself, is eggs and toast. Hard to screw up eggs and toast. These were all right.

He sipped the coffee. Ugh! Bitter. Damn bitter. He spooned in more sugar. Helped some, but not much.

"I toldja it was strong," the girl said.

He didn't say anything.

"Guess you wonder, this being Alma's Place, who's Alma, huh?"

"Hadn't thought about it."

"Alma was my mother."

"Was?"

"She died. Little over a month ago. Just didn't last till the Holiday."

He looked up. "You mean—until Halloween?"

"Right. She just didn't last."

"Sorry."

"Well, we all gotta go sometime. Nobody lives forever, right? It's like the Indians used to say—about how when it's your time an' all."

He spread butter on his toast. It was burned. "Guess you don't get much business around here."

"Not much. Not anymore. Used to be the cotton mill was open. They named this town after it, Doour's Mill. Owned by Mr. Jonathan Doour."

"What happened to him?"

"He died and it closed down. All the mill folk moved away. We got only a real few left in the town now. Real few."

"Why do you stay?"

"I own the place is why." She shrugged, picking at a shred of loose skin on her lower lip. "Mama wanted me to keep it going. Besides—" and for the first time she smiled—"people gotta eat!"

"I didn't see any other lights along the street," he said. "Are you the only one open at night?"

"Mr. Exetor's drugstore stays open. Half a block down." She pointed. "He's open to ten, like here."

"Good. I could use some cigarettes."

"He's a widowman, Mr. Exetor is. Wife passed on end of the summer. Just wasted away."

He finished eating, pushed his plate back.

"More coffee?"

"I'll pass. Too strong for me."

"Yeah, like I said, it's kinda strong." She looked at him with intense, shadowed dark eyes. "You're invited to the Ceremony."

"What?"

"You're invited. We have it each Holiday. On October 31st, each year. And you're invited."

"I don't go to church," he said. "But thanks anyhow." He got out his wallet. "How much do I owe you?"

"That'll be seventy-five cents," she said.

"Here's a buck. Keep the change."

"Thanks, mister." She rang up his order on the ancient cash register. "Ceremony's not in church. Fact is, we don't have a church here anymore. I mean, we *have* one, but it's boarded up. They broke all the windows."

"I see." He picked up his travel bag, moved to the door.

"Happy Holiday," said the girl.

"Same to you," he said, and walked out.

It was raining now. A thin misting foggy rain. The street glistened like black leather under the pale light cast by the cafe's overhead neon.

He turned up the collar of his coat and walked to the drugstore. No sign outside, but the window said EXETOR'S, in chipped gilt. He walked in, and a tiny bell tinkled over the door.

Exetor was round-shouldered, cadaverous, with a bald head and long, big-knuckled hand. A thick vein pulsed, wormlike, in his mottled neck. Looked as if he'd be joining his wife soon. Well, in a town like this, it didn't matter much whether you were alive or dead. The old man had been fiddling with a box of pipe cleaners and now he put the box down. "Might I help you, sir?"

"Salem Hundreds. Two packs."

Exetor walked behind a dust-filmed tobacco counter and got the cigarettes. "You from the bus?"

"That's right."

"I saw it come in."

"Our driver had some engine trouble. We were due in Providence. Is there a hotel in town?"

"Certainly," said Exetor, accepting payment for the cigarettes and ringing up the sale. "The Blackthorn. Just down the way. Right at the intersection. You walk left. Big three-story building on the corner. Can't miss it."

"I sure never expected to be staying *here* tonight."

"No problem getting a room at the Blackthorn. Not many folks around anymore. Expect they'll be closing one of these days. Like me. Just not enough business to keep any of us going."

He nodded. "I can see that."

Exetor smiled thinly. "Sad. About this town, I mean. So much history here. Have you heard of Roger Williams?"

"Can't say I have."

"Strong-minded man, he was. They banned him from Massachusetts for religious nonconformity. But that didn't stop him. He established the first settlement in Providence, in 1636. Remarkable man." Exetor's voice grew more intense. "Jonathan Doour was related to Williams. Had an oil painting of him hanging on the wall of his office at the mill. So this town's part of history, you see. All of it, tied together—going back to 1636."

"Gives you something to hang on to, I guess." The old guy was a real bore. Who gives a damn about some religious nut from the 1600s? Maybe that's what the Ceremony was all about—honoring his memory or some such crap.



"Each year, more of us pass on," said Exetor. "Just don't make it to the Holiday."

"You people seem to think a lot of Halloween."

"Oh, yes, indeed we *do*." Exetor nodded, the neck vein pulsing. "It's very important to us here at the Mill. We have our Ceremony at this time each year."

"So I've been told. I'm not much for ceremonies."

Exetor clucked his tongue against yellowed teeth. "It's the only day I really look forward to anymore," he said, his voice soft with regret. "My wife and I always attended together. I'll be alone this year."

"Oh, yes—I heard about your wife. That's tough." He edged toward the door. This old geezer planned to talk all night.

"It's most difficult, getting on without Ettie."

He was almost to the door when a wall sign caught his eye.

#### HAPPY ALL HOLLOWES EVE

Again, misspelled. Should be All *Hallows*. Didn't anybody ever go to school in this burg?

He reached the door, opened it. The bell tinkled.

"You are invited to the Ceremony," said Exetor.

"No thanks." He started out—and heard Exetor say: "Attendance is not voluntary."

He left the drugstore. Now what the hell did *that* mean? He looked back through the cracked plate-glass window at the old guy. Exetor was standing there, staring out at him, not moving.

Weirdo. Him *and* that chick at the cafe. Both of them, weirdos.

It was still raining. He shifted the weight of his travel bag from right to left hand and began to walk in the direction of the Blackthorn. He was feeling kind of lousy. Stomach upset. Headache. Maybe it was the long bus ride and his missing the Sutter contract. He'd be fine once he'd moved up his total to fourteen.

Right now, he just needed a good night's sacktime. He checked his watch. Getting toward ten. Exetor and the cafe girl would be closing up, probably heading for their Ceremony. Fine. Just so they were quiet about it. No loud music or dancing. He grinned, thinking what ole Exetor would look like hopping around the floor. Exetor, the Dancing Skeleton!

He heard something behind him—the low-purring sound of a car's motor in the misting rain.

Cop's car. Sheriff. And with a deputy in the seat next to him. The car glided slowly alongside, stopped. Jeeze, he hated cops. *All* cops.

"Evening," said the sheriff.

"Evening," he said.

The lawman was gaunt and sharp-featured. So was his deputy. And both solemn. No smiles. But then, cops don't smile much.

"Just into town, are you?"

They damn well *knew* he was—but they liked playing their cop games.

"I came in earlier with the bus. They're fixing it. We had a breakdown."

"Uh huh," said the sheriff. "Harley, over to the garage, he told me about the trouble."

A pause—as they stared at him from the car's shadowed interior. The motor throbbed softly, like a beating heart in the wet darkness.

Finally, the sheriff asked: "You staying at the hotel?"

"I plan to. Guess they've got plenty of room."

The sheriff chuckled wetly, a bubbling sound. "That they have, mister." Another pause. Then: "Mind if we look over your suitcase?"

He stiffened. The Mag .357! But unless they tore the travel bag to pieces, they wouldn't find it.

The sheriff remained behind the wheel as his deputy got out, knelt in the wet street to open the bag.

"Gonna ruin your pants, Dave," said the sheriff.

"They'll dry," said the deputy, sifting through the contents, patting down shirts, fingering coats.

He tried to look normal, but he was sweating. The hidden gun compartment was just under the deputy's right hand. If he . . .

"Thanks, mister," said the deputy, snapping the bag closed. "Never can tell what folks'll carry."

"Guess not."

The deputy got back in the car, leaned out from the rolled-down window. His voice was reedy. "Happy Holiday," he said.

The car rolled forward, gradually losing definition in the misting darkness.

The hotel was no surprise. Meaning it looked crappy. Sagging. Falling apart. Paint-blistered. Wood missing from the upper porch steps.

Well, it's like my sweet mother used to say, beggars can't be choosers.

He walked up the steps, avoiding the broken areas, and entered the lobby through a loose-hinged, leaded-glass door. The lobby was bare, dusty, deserted.

A clerk dozed behind the wall counter. Another skinny character. Middle-aged scarecrow in a rumpled suit. His nose was long, thin, almost transparent.

"I'll need a room."

The clerk's head jerked up like a stringed puppet. He blinked, reached for a pair of thick-lensed glasses, put them on. Pale blue eyes swam behind the lenses. "Cost you five dollars."

"I think I can handle that."

"Sign here. Name and address." The clerk pushed a card across the grimed counter.

He signed it, using a phony name and address. Never tell anybody the truth about yourself. He'd learned that in Kansas City. And a lot of other places.

He gave the clerk a five-dollar bill. And got a key.

"Guess I'm not the first here tonight," he said.

"Don't get you, mister."

"There was an elderly couple on the bus with me, coming in. They must have registered earlier."

"Nope." The clerk shook his head. "You're our first in 'bout a week. Nobody else tonight."

Strange. Where would they go?

"Yours is on three. Use the elevator. Stairs are rotted out. Sidney will take you up. If he's sleepin', just give him a poke. Room 3-H."

He nodded, moved across the wide, vacant lobby with his travel bag to the elevator. Its metal-pleated door was open. Inside, draped over a high wooden stool like a discarded bundle of dirty clothes, was a stick-thin old man. His patchy hair was streaked gray-white over his long skull.

"You got a customer, Pop."

The deep-socket eyes opened slowly. He stared at the stranger out of large milky pupils. "What floor?"

"The top. Three."

He stepped into the cage and felt it give perceptibly under his weight. "This thing safe?"

"Weren't, I wouldn't be in it," said the old man.

The pitted grill-door slid closed and the old man pushed down a corroded wall lever. His wrist was ropy, spotted with sores. The ancient cage creaked rustily into upward motion.

The old man's odor was strong, almost fetid. "Staying the night, are you?"

"I'm not here for the floor show."

He was getting sick of dealing with these weirdos. Nothing to gain by continuing to answer their stupid questions. He *was* amused by the fact

that a sleazy hotel like this actually employed an elevator operator. No wonder the old croak slept on the job; nothing the hell *else* to do.

"We were the first state to declare independence from the Mother Country. You know that?"

He grunted.

"May the 4th, 1776, it was. We declared *two* months ahead of all the other colonies! Little Rhody was first, yes sir. First to declare."

"Were you *there*, Pop?"

The old man chuckled like dry leaves scraping. "Not hardly. But I've been around a spell. Seen things happen. Seen a lotta people die. But I made it again this year. Made it to the Holiday."

Another Halloween Freak.

They reached the top, and the black door folded back into itself like an iron spider.

He stepped out. The cage rattled downward as he walked toward 3-H. The hall reeked of mold and decay. Rug was damp, lumped. Ceiling was peeling away in thick, hanging folds, like strips of dead meat. He could hear the steady drip-drip-drip of rain coming in through the holes in the roof. Jeez, what a pit!

He reached the hallway's end. The door on 3-H startled him. It was a lot fancier than the others, ornamented in an intricately carved rose design. The knob was scrolled brass. He keyed the door open and swore softly. They'd given him the bridal suite! Well, why not? Nobody was about to pick the Blackthorn in Doour's Mill for a honeymoon!

It wasn't a suite, actually. Just one big chamber, with a bathroom off to the side. The bed, centered in the room, was enormous. Talk about your antiques! The tall gilt headboard was decorated with plaster angels. The gold paint had dimmed, and most of the angels had cracked wings, but he had to admit that the effect was still damned impressive.

A big faded-pink dresser loomed against one wall. Two velvet-black chairs, seedy but elegant, stood beside a huge cut-velvet couch fitted with rose-carved brass studs. A large mirror dominated the wall above them, framed in faded gold.

He walked over to it, looked at himself. Needed a shave. Coat and shirt wrinkled, damp from the rain. Looked like his old man. A bum.

The bathroom was full of badly chipped tile and rusted brass fittings. But at least there was a shower. He hadn't counted on one. Real bonus in a fleapit like this.

He opened his bag, took out the travel clock, set it for five-thirty. That would give him plenty of time to get dressed and down to the garage by six, when the bus was ready to leave. He'd be glad to shake this freak

town. Gave him the creeps. After Doour's Mill, New York would be Paris in the spring!

Damn! No inside chain lock. Just the regular knob lock. Well, that was okay. He always slept with the .357 under his pillow. Best protection in the world.

He had expected that the hot shower would make him feel better, but it hadn't. He still felt lousy, really kind of hung over. Dog tired. And sickish. Had to be the food at Alma's. Those eggs were probably half-spoiled. And that rat-piss coffee—that stuff would kill Frankenstein!

He slid his loaded Magnum under the pillow and put on a pair of white silk pajamas. The bed was great. Deep and soft, not at all lumpy or damp. And the sheets were crisp, freshly ironed. Not so bad after all.

It wasn't much after ten. He'd get a full night's rest. God, but he was beat. He stretched out on the big mattress, closed his eyes—and was instantly asleep.

He awoke slowly. Not to the clock alarm. To a low murmur of voices. Here. *In* the room with him.

"It's wearing off." Man's voice. Old.

"He's coming round." Woman's. Also old.

His eyes opened. He blinked, trying to get a clear focus on the dim figures in the room. The only light came from the bathroom and the door was partially shut. Things were murky.

There were several of them, surrounding the bed in a rustling circle.

"Welcome to the Ceremony," said the bus driver.

It was him, all right, and no mistake. Before he could fully register the shock of this, another voice said: "Happy Holiday!"

Focus. On the source of this second voice. It was Harley, the garage owner. His greasy mechanic stood next to him.

Now, rapidly, he ran his gaze over all of them: the elderly couple from the bus . . . Exetor . . . Alma's daughter . . . the lobby clerk . . . the old elevator man . . . the two skinny teenagers . . . Even the sheriff and his bony-faced deputy were here. Everybody he'd seen in the whole damn town—all here, around his bed, smiling down at him. And all of them thin, gaunt, wasted-looking.

He counted. There must be . . . Oh, Christ, yes, there were 13 of them!

A long iced wave of absolute fear engulfed him, and he closed his eyes to shut out the horrific ring of skulled faces.

"As I pointed out earlier this evening," said Exetor, "your attendance at the Ceremony was not voluntary. It was *required*."

"Yes, indeedy," agreed the hotel clerk, peering down at him with swimming fish eyes. "You're our Guest of Honor."

He tried to speak but could not; the words were choked bile in his throat.

"Can't give our Ceremony without a Guest of Honor," said the elevator man.

The elderly couple were holding hands. The woman spoke slowly, distinctly. "Henry and I weren't at all sure we'd last till the Hollow Day. Not at *all* sure."

"Each year at this time we gather to be replenished," said Exetor, "thanks to our Guest of Honor. Believe me, sir, we *appreciate* what you are giving us."

"I can have my baby now!" said the teenaged girl excitedly. The boy put his arm around her narrow waist. He kissed her gently on the cheek. Beside them, the garage owner's eyes shone with pride.

"Ain't many new babies born to Mill folk anymore," he said. "We cherish our young, we surely do. Laurie here—she'll have the strength to bear, thanks to you."

"That's right," the bus driver said. "I tell ya, buddy, we're *deeply* grateful!"

"I'm sure sorry that coffee I served you was so darn bitter," said Alma's daughter. "But the stuff I had to use in it tastes plain *awful*. Still, it's very restful. Keeps you from hurting when we're getting you ready."

He was fully awake now, and anger flushed through him. Under his pillow. The loaded .357 Magnum. He'd blow them away, every damned freakish one of them!

But he couldn't reach the gun. He suddenly became aware that his wrists were strapped to the sides of the bed, as were his ankles. And there was another wide leather strap across his chest, holding him down.

And . . . oh, God . . . there were the snakes!

Thirteen of them!

No, not snakes, they were . . . some kind of rubbery tubes. Coiling out from his body into the figures surrounding him, a tube for each of them, attached to his flesh and ending in *their* flesh—like obscene umbilical cords.

Jesus—they were *feeder* tubes!

"Ettie so wanted to be here," said Exetor softly. "It would have meant more months of life for her. But she just couldn't last to the Ceremony."

The sheriff patted the old man's arm in sympathy. "Ettie was a mighty fine woman."

He strained desperately against the straps, but they held firm.

“No use pushin’ like that,” said the mechanic in the rotted dark coveralls. “You ain’t goin’ nowhere. Sheriff Morland fixed them straps personal. They’re good and tight.”

He felt himself weakening now. Moment by moment, his strength was being bled away—into them. As he grew weaker, they grew stronger. Their eyes were brighter; their cheeks began to acquire a glow.

The waitress tipped back her head, closed her eyes. “Ummmmm, sure feels good!”

“Nothing will be wasted. I assure you,” Exetor said. “We use *everything*. Even the marrow.”

“Bone marrow’s good for the teeth,” said the teenaged boy. “And we need healthy teeth for our baby.”

“Tell us your name and we’ll call it after you,” said the teenaged girl. “As a gesture, you might say.”

“He won’t tell,” said the hotel clerk. “Gene Johnson was on the card, but I bet you ten dollars that name’s a fake.” He blinked downward. “*Will* you tell us your real name, mister?”

He gasped out the words: “You . . . can . . . all . . . go . . . to hell!”

They looked at one another. The bony deputy shook his head. “Well now, we sure hope the good Lord don’t see fit to send us down *there*. We’re all decent folk, here at the Mill. Always have been.”

The figures in the rustling circle nodded agreement.

Things were dimming in the room. He blinked, feeling weak as a newborn cat. The anger was gone. The fear was gone. He was tired. Very, very tired. It was like being on the bus again, with the thrumming wheels making him drowsy. His eyelids were heavy. He wanted to close them. Did.

Darkness now.

And rest.

No more worry.

No more pain.

Everything was fine.

## The Woman In Black

Dennis Etchison

*Dennis Etchison is another of that small group of first-rank horror writers who have only with the recent upsurge of interest in horror fiction begun to receive the critical recognition they have quietly earned over the years. Born in Stockton, California on March 30, 1943, Etchison now lives in Los Angeles, where he teaches creative writing at U.C.L.A. An avid film fan, Etchison claims to know more movie trivia than David J. Schow. In spring of 1985 he was a staff writer for the HBO series, The Hitchhiker. Scream/Press has published two excellent collections of Etchison's short fiction—The Dark Country and Red Dreams—and a third is forthcoming. A novel, Darkside, was a summer release from Berkley Books. As editor, the versatile Etchison also has a series of reprint anthologies due from Tor Books, Masters of Darkness, as well as an anthology of original fiction from Doubleday, The Cutting Edge. Other books include novelizations of the horror films, The Fog, Halloween II, Halloween III, and Videodrome (the last three under the pseudonym Jack Martin).*

WHEN THEY TOOK his mother away he went to live in the big house.

There he discovered rooms within rooms, drapes like thick shrouds, a kitchen stove big enough to crawl into, overstuffed furniture that changed shape as he passed, a table with claw feet larger than his head, ancient carpets with designs too worn to read, floor heating grates that clanged when he walked on them, musty closets opening on blackness, shadowed hallways that had no end.

These things did not frighten him.

For soon he made friends with the boy across the street; his aunts and uncles came by to help with the meals; it was summer and the back yard stayed light forever.

Before long, however, after only a few days and nights, he found that he could think of but one thing: of the lot next door, beyond the fence, of the high wall that kept him from its bright and dark treasures.



He was in the grove behind the arbor, about to pluck a fig from a low-hanging branch, when someone opened the front gate.

The fig hung there among pale jigsaw leaves, swinging to and fro like a black teardrop. He looked over his shoulder, through luminous bunches of grapes clinging to the lattice. The air was still. At the end of the arbor a plum dropped from a tree, splitting its skin as it landed and spattering the grass below with glistening juice. A piece of heavy iron groaned on the other side of the fence, the same sound he heard at night when the blue lights began to flicker; he was thankful it was day time now so that he could try to ignore it.

He turned his head in time to see his uncle striding toward him along the path, grinding fallen grapes into green stains on the gravel. The boy breathed again and returned his attention to the translucent leaves and the pendulous fruit swaying there.

“Hi, Uncle Ted.”

“Willy.” His uncle came up next to him and stood squinting sadly at the untended yard, at the scraggly weeds poking their way under the fence. “Have you talked to Grandma today?”

“When I got up. I made my own breakfast. I went into her room for a while. Then I went over to Vern’s to play.” He closed his fingers around the fig and pulled; the soft tissue bent and snapped and a milky drop of sap oozed out of the stem.

Uncle Ted shifted his weight and studied his shoes. “Do you like it, living here?”

“I like it fine. Uncle Ted, the Fair’s coming to town next week. Vern says they have different rides this year. New animals, too. We’re saving our money. Can I go?”

“We’ll see, Willy, we’ll see.”

A breeze passed by, rustling the leaves. The tall iron that showed above the security fence groaned again but did not really move; that was only a tree throwing its shadow against the rusty bolts. On the next block a dog barked; Grandma’s chickens clucked suspiciously in response. William peeled the fig and opened it like a flower in his hand. It was sweet and the tiny seeds popped in his teeth like soft sand.

“I know you miss your mother, Willy.”

“Sure.” He sucked at the fleshy pulp until his tongue tingled, smearing his face, and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. He discarded the skin and glanced up. Uncle Ted was waiting for something. What was William supposed to say? “Is she coming home today?”

“We all miss her. Very much.”

“Tomorrow?”

"I'm afraid not."

"Saturday? Maybe Aunt Emily and Aunt Grace could come over and we could make a special dinner for her. I can wash the dishes, and afterwards—"

Uncle Ted cleared his throat. He twisted his fingers together behind his back and pointed his chin at the sky and took a deep breath so that his chest puffed out, his tan shirt taut. He was looking toward the top of the iron crane towering above the fence, but that was not what he was thinking about. It must have been something a long way off, higher and farther than William could see.

"No," said Uncle Ted.

"Oh."

The man sighed. He unclenched his hands and ran them nervously over his head. William remembered the way his uncle had looked after his last tour of duty, his close-cropped hair and the sharp creases in his shirt. Since he got back he wore looser clothes and did not stand so rigidly, but his hair was still short and brushed slick.

Now Uncle Ted stood straight again, locking his knees till he was as tall as he could make himself. William almost expected him to salute.

"You haven't been trying to climb over the fence, have you?"

"No, Uncle Ted. Only—"

"Only what?" The man squinted again, and this time his brow furrowed with anger. He began opening and closing his eyes very rapidly. He set his jaw and glared down at the boy.

"N-nothing," said William.

"You got something to say, boy, say it!"

"Well—" What was his uncle so upset about? William was sure it could be nothing he had done. "Well, sometimes I wish I could see what's on the other side. Do you know what's over there, Uncle Ted?"

"Nothing for a child to worry about. It's private property and don't you forget it. From the fence down to the river it all belongs to the government. Only thing for a little boy to do over there is slip and fall and get hurt, get himself into a whole lot of trouble. But we'd better be glad it's there. And proud! We'd better be!"

"I believe you, Uncle Ted. I never tried to climb over. I wouldn't even go near it. I know I'm not supposed to—to—"

His voice broke and his eyes watered so that the branches wavered and his uncle's legs buckled as if they were made of jelly. He felt an ache in his chest and a numbness in his lips and cheeks; suddenly the air around him was unseasonably cold, a warning of some impending change in the weather. A hurting welled up in him that went far beyond

this argument which was no argument at all and which seemed to make no sense.

A strong arm encircled his shoulders.

He opened his eyes wide. What he had seen a moment ago was true: now his uncle stood less tall, slumped as if the wind had been knocked out of him, his shoulders rounded under an oppressive weight. The man removed his arm self-consciously, put his hands together until his nails were white, and cracked his knuckles. The sound was painfully loud in the stillness, like bones breaking.

"I know, Willy," said his uncle, "I know." His eyes glazed with that same faraway look. He pinched his nose and massaged the furrow from his brow. William noted that the man's hand was shaking. "I'll take care of everything. From now on. We'll keep you safe and strong. We can do it. I know we can. Anything you need, you ask Aunt Emily or me and we'll do our best to . . ."

William said, "I think I'd like to visit my mother, if she's not coming home Saturday. I'd like to go soon. If that's all right."

The man shook his head, a decisive twitch. "They wouldn't let you in. Not even that. They never would."

William swallowed and cleared his head, trying to shake off the bad feeling. "Well," he said, "when *are* they going to let my mother out of the hospital?"

"When?" said Uncle Ted absently. "Wh . . ." And here his voice failed him for the first time. William wanted to do something to help him, to thump him on the back the way he did when Grandma got to coughing, but he could not reach that far. "I'm afraid," said the man, "that your mother's never coming back to Greenworth. You understand, don't you boy? Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

The moment was frozen in time. William wanted badly to break and run. His eyes darted around the yard, desperate to find a way out, a secret passage, a doorway in the fence that he had not noticed before.

His uncle held him by the back of the neck. But it wasn't necessary. He couldn't run now.

For there, behind the screen of the back porch, half-hidden but visible in dark outline, was the figure of a woman. She was dressed in a flowing black garment. William could not make out her features, not even her eyes, but he knew that she was watching him as he stood in the garden.

He sat with his grandmother, rubbing the circulation back into her wrists, as the day came to an end.

"Oh, you must go darling," she was saying. "Don't be afraid. There will be so many interesting things to see!"

"I don't want to," said William.

He knew his grandmother always let him have his way, even when it was not what was best for him, and he loved her for that. But now he had had a change of heart about going to the Fair and she would not understand. Had she turned against him at last?

It was as if she refused to acknowledge what had happened. She sat propped up in bed, looking out her bedroom window as usual, an expression of serene acceptance on her face. Didn't she notice that the back yard would soon be overgrown with stinky weeds like the ones near the fence? *My Grandma's getting old*, he realized, and then tried to force that thought from his mind.

She smiled and took his wrist in both of her hands. "I understand how you feel. It's only natural. But no one is ever quite ready for anything when it comes along. Besides, who knows what wonders you'll find waiting for you when you get there? It's not far at all."

She clasped his hands coolly and gazed outside again. A thin, blue twilight was rapidly descending, and already angular shadows had grown over the henhouse next to the fence, shading the tops of the machinery on the other side until the riveted joints and streaked I-beams became the jutting turrets of an iron fortress.

"Like what?" asked William without curiosity.

It would be no fun this time. How could it be? He had more important things to think about now, things he did not even know if he could make himself consider; things he felt certain he could not begin to understand. The Fair was too late this year, he knew, and his heart sank. From now on it would always be too late.

His grandmother drifted away from him, lost in the gray convolutions of the bed that marked the limits of her world now. Her eyelids closed halfway and her pupils thickened.

"Such wonders!" she said, her voice intense but growing fainter, her chest fluttering from the effort. "I've dreamed of them. Wings soft as clouds, doves with faces dearer than a baby's, all God's creatures come together at last . . . oh, darling, it will be so beautiful!"

"They have all that?" How could she know? The big trucks hadn't even crossed the city limits yet, he was sure. Only Vern seemed to know ahead of time, and that was because of his cousin who worked on the carnival crew. "Are you sure?"

"As sure as I've ever been of anything."

"Well," he said, "I still don't think I want to go."

"And why not?"

"I—it'd be too lonely."

"But you won't be alone!"

"Yes, I will," he said. He thought of Vern and the way his friend would behave around him now, cautious and polite, afraid to say the wrong things, so careful that they would have no fun at all. He remembered the way it was the day his father did not come home from the power plant, and for weeks after—the way everyone left him alone at school and did not ask him to play, as though he were fragile and might break if they came too close. Vern would walk apart from him all the way to the Fairgrounds, offering William too much of his candy and waiting for him to decide what they would do next, ride after ride, the whole time. It was more than he could bear. He would feel different, special, and that would only make the day longer and sadder.

"Oh, darling, I wish I could go with you! Perhaps I shall," she added, patting his hand again. "One can never be sure . . ."

Of course he knew she didn't mean it. She couldn't.

"I wish my daddy could go with me," he whispered.

She beamed. "He's already there."

"What?"

Her eyes grew strange. "Don't you know that, child? You must try to believe. It will be so much easier for you."

William felt a knot in his stomach. Suddenly he was no longer sure of anything. He wondered if he and his grandmother were even talking about the same thing.

"What else do they have?" he said too loudly, testing her. "Do they have—" He groped for a word. "Do they have gorillas? From Africa?"

"They do."

"And elephants?" That was a good one. He knew the Fair was too small to have elephants.

"That, too."

He thought of the dream last week, after he had heard the groaning sound louder than ever from deep within the enclosure. "Do they have birds with wings you can see through?"

"Yes."

"And—and a talking pig? Do they have a pit that talks, Grandma? Do they really?"

"I'm sure of it. Anything the mind can imagine, and more."

He sat forward, making fists. "No, they don't. It's only a Fair, Grandma. A Fair!"

"What a lovely way of putting it. The Animal Fair! And all just there, on the other side. So close, and getting closer all the time. Soon there

will be no barrier at all. The birds and the beasts . . . anything and everything, oh, yes!”

*Anything?* he thought. *If they have everything, do they have mothers there?*

He stood up in the close bedroom, his arms stiff at his sides, and stared defiantly at the old woman. But she only continued to peer out at the back yard as if it were a vision of the Promised Land, at the sea of weeds overrunning the grounds, the trees and vines that had grown gnarled and misshapen as her hands, the fruit that seemed to be illuminated by a cold light from within if you looked too closely in the night. Her eyes were filmed over; she could no longer see what had become of her home. Either that or she saw and embraced it all, and that possibility frightened him more than anything else.

“Don’t you understand, Grandma? Don’t you see? We—we’ve got to get away from here!”

Even after daddy got sick they had stayed because of his work, and then when it was too late his mother refused to leave out of some kind of loyalty to his memory, and because her brothers lived here, because Greenworth was her home. But now in a blinding flash he knew that they were wrong. Their faith was a stubbornness that was killing them all.

“I want to leave, Grandma. Let’s move away. I can go to another school. We can sell this house and—”

“And go where? Another house, another street, it’s all the same. Child, it’s everywhere . . .”

“Someplace else, then! If we go far enough away you’ll get well and—and—”

Grandma’s shoulders moved; she was laughing or crying, he couldn’t tell which. “Don’t you see, Willy? It’s too late to run. This is the way it is now. For all of us. No use fighting it. It’s growing up all around. The only answer left is to cross over . . .” Her weeping chuckle became a cough.

William moved reflexively to thump her between the shoulder blades and end the spasm. But this time he could not bring himself to strike her for fear that her frail body might not withstand the impact of his small hand. He touched the flannel of her nightgown and felt how unnaturally cool it was, saw the wan flesh of her neck above the ruffled collar. He yanked his hand away. His fingers were tingling. He looked at his palm. It was ashen, bloodless. Like her skin. *Does it rub off, Grandma?* he wondered in a panic. *Does it?*

He sprang away from the bed, bolted from the bedroom and ran out of the house without looking back.

*She’s dead, she’s really dead.* It hit him full force as he fled down the

steps and into the garden. The stone path snaked out behind him, its tail eaten by the darkness gathering under the porch. Before him lay the remains of the back yard, a landscape that now seemed filled with skeletal trees and vines reaching impatiently toward the face of the rising moon. *My mother's dead.* He tore down the path, a chill piercing his heart. Branches like bony fingers tried to snare his arms. He zigzagged and caromed off a tree trunk, dislodging the last of the dark, testicular fruit drooping and shriveling there. *She's dead and she's never coming back not ever!*

He hurried by the chicken coop, seeing the bobbing necks of the hens and roosters as they gawked with alarm at his passing. Their wings spread and beat out a flurry of feathers that were like snowflakes on the air. He could not escape their agate eyes. He paused long enough to open the pen and calm their squeaking. They assembled between his legs, covering his own ankles with their plumage.

"Shh," he told them, "it's all right, we're all all right," and did not believe it.

They observed him indifferently, the few remaining feathers on their scrawny bodies settling back into place.

His eyes filled with tears.

As he knelt one small chicken, his favorite, flew onto his knee. He stroked its piebald head and kissed its beak. The others tiptoed away to scratch at the hard dirt, and as the flock parted he saw a shape on the ground by the water trough.

It was the oldest and plumpest of the hens, lying on one side with her claws curled inward. Her feathers rippled and lifted.

He rose to a crouch and crept closer. He wondered how long she had been dead. It couldn't have been very long, but already an army of ants had established a supply trail in and out of the open mouth, where the tongue protruded like a pink arrow.

He extended his arm to touch her, and immediately snatched his hand away as if she were hot. Damp feathers fell aside. The wrinkled skin was teeming with maggots, busily transforming the carcass into something he did not want to see.

He gagged and hid his face.

Who would take care of her chicks now? He reached behind the perch and found her nest. This time there were no peeps, no tiny pecks at his fingers. That was good. She had left no little ones behind. He felt the polished roundness of an egg. Gently he lifted it out.

The egg was smooth as porcelain but oddly soft. And cold. He cupped it gingerly in his hand and raised it to the dying light.

The shell was full-sized but not all of it had hardened properly. Part of the surface was nearly transparent, little more than a stretched membrane. He looked closer. Barely covered by the thin cellular wall was a distorted, malformed embryo. It was unlike any chick he had ever seen before, an error of nature mutated in vitro. Its congealed, elongated eye stared back at him through a delicate lace of veins.

William shuddered. Crying silently, he replaced the egg in the nest and covered it with straw. *There*, he thought, *you won't have anything to worry about now. Maybe it's better this way, after all.*

A cold wind blew through the trees. It whistled in from the front yard, catching and keening in the eaves of the house. Did something move there, just inside the screen porch? No, it couldn't be. Grandma never got out of bed anymore. If anyone else were inside there would be a light showing somewhere.

*Could it be—?*

No. There was nothing, nothing. He told himself that. He dug his nails into his hands until his palms bled. *What a baby you are. You're afraid of—of—*

There was a wailing sound. It blew in on the wind from the other side of the house.

He heard a commotion then, the dull clicking of heels on the sidewalk, and a scream. Somewhere a door slammed. The screaming did not stop.

He latched the chicken coop and hurried to the street.

At first nothing seemed out of place. The view from his gate was of the same houses, the roofs sagging under a dingy sky, the treetops jagged silhouettes against the horizon, their distended roots raising the pavement in uneven waves. There were the sunken boundary lines of cracked cement between the yards, only the reinforced security fence that began next door still tall and straight, porchlamps like the first stars of evening vibrating with oversized insects, Vern's house across the street leaking spikes of yellow light.

But wait. There was movement in the bushes by Vern's porch, a shaking out and a separating and then the stab of legs in the dimness.

Vern's mother was already at the corner, huddled under a streetlamp with her face in her hands. The shape of her body blended with the shadows so that she might have stood there for hours before William noticed her. But now Vern's older brother was running to bring her back to the house as the short bursts of screaming started again, tight and muffled by her knuckles.

William stepped off the curb.

The wailing at the end of the block became louder, rising and falling



like a buzz saw, as a long car cut across the intersection and sped up the middle of the street. William jumped out of the way and saw that it was one of the dark military vehicles from the plant, like the one that had come to take his mother.

ECNALUBMA, it said across the front.

It dipped and braked and three men in uniforms hopped down and raced to Vern's porch, a blur of equipment under their arms. The screen door flapped open. A moment later they reemerged carrying a litter, unfolded to support a bulky form. They were no longer in a hurry, and the sheet was drawn up all the way.

The screen door flapped again and Vern's family followed, heads low, their feet scraping the rough cement. There was Vern's sister Nan, two of the cousins from the next block, and Vern himself, so much shorter than the others. William looked for the stocky contour of Vern's father, the broad shoulders and thick waist, but no one like that came out except for the chunky mound under the sheet.

William called out and waved until Vern spotted him. His friend didn't wave back. His head was down between his shoulders and he was marching forward as though underwater.

Vern did not watch the men loading the gurney into the back of the van. The cousins waited solemnly a while longer, then went to help bring Vern's mother back. She did not want to come. Her screams became a whimpering. When Vern did not move, William started across the street.

"Vern? Hey, Vern! What happened? Are you all right?"

One more figure came out of the house. William did not know who she could be. By some trick of light and shade the door did not appear to swing open for her, and yet there she was, following Vern like a tall shadow. She glided down the walkway behind him, a breeze filling her draped black veil.

William stopped.

Vern finally raised his eyes, saw William, and his face relaxed slightly. But he did not come forward.

The woman drifted ahead, her flowing garment enfolding Vern and then passing him as though he were not there. She floated away from them all and into the street, heading for the house where William now lived. The wispy black material covered her completely, almost wrapping her legs and feet as it trailed out behind her, and yet she did not hesitate at the broken curb. As the veil blew against her face William thought he saw something familiar in the shape of her features, but he could not be sure. He turned to watch her cross the humped blacktop and alight on the other sidewalk.

Vern said something at last, but his words were lost on the wind.

The woman approached Grandma's house, only to bypass it in favor of the fenced-in area that began next door, not even slowing as she neared the high locked gate. Her face was still hidden by the veil, but William was sure that she was looking at him.

"No!"

Was Vern watching her, too? William looked back and saw his friend waving wildly, his arms raised in a railroader's highsign.

"No, Willy! Don't go in there . . . stay here! Don't . . .!"

It was too late. He had to know.

When William turned again she was already through the gate. The edge of her veil slipped through the metal links and disappeared inside the compound.

Drawn by a feeling he could not name, William ignored the ambulance as it pulled slowly away, its siren now silenced, and followed the woman in black.

The entrance was heavily chained and padlocked, as if no one had gone in or out for a very long time. He could not slip through or under. He could scale the fence and the wall behind it if he used the links in the gate for footholds, but the barbed wire at the top would be a problem. He disregarded the old warning signs posted around the perimeter, hooked his fingers into the ragged metal, and started climbing.

The barbs were sharp but he squeezed his eyes shut on the pain, rolled over the top as quickly as possible, and dropped down on the other side.

It wasn't very far at all.

The sounds of life in the street, the tinkling wind that blew across the town, the lights going out in the rest of the world were all distractions cut off from him now. The deepening darkness was inviting, a cushion that broke his fall and called him to enter it at last.

Where had she gone?

There was no path for him to follow. As his eyes adjusted he made out the struts and crossbeams of an old support scaffolding, the flaking treads of an abandoned earthmoving tractor, the corroded shell of an amphibious tank, a hydraulic scoop, the segments of a conveyor belt, a teetering stack of old tires shot through with twiggy, hybrid weeds. Somewhere behind the tires a flickering like cold fire shone between collapsed sidewalls.

He got up from his hands and knees and made his way through the debris.

He passed a junked truck and came out into a small clearing. The moon

was high above bowed tiers of rotting lumber, but it was a different light that beckoned him now.

He paused to get his bearings. The wall to his right might have been the fence along his grandmother's yard, but how could he be sure? Serpentine foliage pressed up to the boards in an ever-expanding tide; soon the last property lines would disappear, swallowed by the unchecked growth. He padded on, placing one foot carefully in front of the other as unseen life forms scurried out of his way, large insects or small animals, rats, perhaps, or something like them.

He brushed a dented panel, releasing a shiver of rust and dirt that fell around him like heavy rain. It was the cab of an outsized reconnaissance vehicle, apparently designed to maneuver over rough terrain. The steel door creaked on its hinges and sent a reverberation through the rest of the machinery.

He covered his head. The driver's seat was empty; the giant shift and brake levers were locked at odd angles, like the seized-up hands of a primitive timing device. He imagined that the vehicle might yet be capable of moving, inching forward to lead an assault under cover of darkness and establish a beachhead in occupied territory. That would explain the groaning he heard, loudest in the dead of night when everyone else was asleep, as though iron and steel were drawing relentlessly closer to the flimsy, unguarded barrier.

The rain of rust stopped. A last echo rang out. In the distant riverbed a population of bullfrogs resumed their fitful chorus. He tried to set a course from their singing but it was no use. There were no landmarks in this place, no way to know that he would not end up where he started. Fear gripped him as a new sound began, a steady rhythm like the pounding of surf on a far shore. It was the beating of his own heart in his ears.

*Help me, he thought, please! Somebody—*

A shadow like the dark, gauzy hem of a long dress skipped over the blade of a forklift, backlighted for an instant by a soft flickering the color of static electricity, and vanished behind the gutted chassis.

Without hesitation he moved toward it.

There was a narrow passageway between piles of ancient brake drums and hubcaps. He pulled in his elbows and pushed through, and came out into the blue light.

At first it was like the pale glow of the phosphorescent stars he had pasted to his bedroom ceiling, only larger and brighter and spread out in a wide band like the Milky Way. Then he focused and saw a loose barricade of old canisters. They were taller and broader than oil drums

and were marked with the same stenciled symbol he had seen on the signs outside, a circle divided into six wedges like a cut-up drawing of a pie. One of them had tumbled onto its side and probably leaked, because the lid was ajar and a heavy inner lining of chipped glass showed where the top had been. Directly in front of it the ground was bare and scorched, but behind the containers a tangle of skinny plants had taken root, and it was these that shimmered with a faint but unmistakable radiance.

On the ground before him, leading up to the cylinders and disappearing into the spray of shrubbery behind, was a series of elongated spots like ghostly footprints.

His placed his sneaker into one of them. The imprint was short and narrow but it fit him perfectly.

William started walking again.

His legs shook tall weeds, and a shower of pollenlike metallic dust settled on his skin. He looked at his hands, transfixed by their sparkling, and his toe thudded into one of the drums.

A few feet away, hidden only by the vegetation, there was an explosion of hysterical squealing and then a great thrashing, as if someone had taken a wrong step and plunged headlong into the darkness.

He swept the weeds aside.

There, sprawled on one side, was an enormous animal. It reminded him of the sows he had seen at the Fair in years past, and yet it was not one of their kind. It was much too large for any pen to hold, its snout thicker than his thigh, its huge underside rising and falling with peaceful regularity. It was black as coal from head to tail except for the immense belly, where now several smaller animals wriggled to regain position. Their fat shapes were stretched with translucent skin, their veins and capillaries aglow with a cold, unearthly light. Tiny silken hairs moved on their restless bodies, which were already pigmented in places with black spots that would soon toughen into a hide able to contain their new forms.

*Does it talk?* he wondered. *Does it, really?*

Awestruck, he stood and watched her suckling her hungry offspring. Then, stumbling desperately, he lunged forward into the glowing circle and flung himself at her teats, his hands feverishly pawing the air as he fought to gain a place there for himself.



## . . . Beside the Seaside, Beside the Sea . . .

Simon Clark

*Simon Clark was born on April 20, 1958 in Wakefield, West Yorkshire—the alleged birthplace of Robin Hood—and currently lives with his wife and son in the South Yorkshire village of Adwick-le-street. A newcomer to this genre, Clark has had stories published in small-press magazines and has written an account of the life and work of the Welsh fantasist, Arthur Machen. In 1984-85 BBC Local Radio broadcast a series of Clark's weird tales together with a radio play which he wrote, created the sound effects for, and acted all the parts. Recently he has completed a script for a half-hour pilot film entitled The Drowned Man for a small production company; shooting was on the east coast of England this past summer. Clark's fascination with deep waters and whatever might inhabit them perhaps stems from his having almost drowned on three occasions. When he is not writing, and can muster enough courage, Clark likes to go skin-diving.*

*Note on Yorkshire dialect: "The" is usually silent in speech. In print it is usually represented as "t" but this is unsatisfactory. The rhythm and many words of Yorkshire dialect come from the invading Vikings who settled in northern England.*

THREE-FIFTHS of the Earth's surface is covered by ocean. From sand beach shallows to icy depths where a layer of salt water seven miles thick covers submerged mountain ranges, valleys, and the rusting hulks of sea-choked ships. The sea: The salt-water womb of life. Yet, an alien world of kelp jungles, silver-sided fish, stony-shelled mollusks and boiling, steam-winded whales.

Temperatures vary from a blood-warm surface in equatorial regions to the ice-thick waters of the arctic and antarctic. The two trade streams of water. Invisible rivers of warm penetrate the cold. And icy fingers push deeply into the body of warmer seas. Along these currents drift the

careless aquatic passengers of the oceans: Jellyfish, weed, kelp, seed pods, the flotsam and jetsam—the living and the dead.

In sweep the currents, with their bobbing free-riders, eventually reaching some coast to deliver their cargoes in the curling foam of surf.

The coastal town hung over the beach, almost lapping the water's edge. It presented a façade of brightly colored lights, pulsing their lotus eater's message into the evening. Crowds drifted along the promenade, occasionally caught in the eddies of smoke-filled bingo halls or drawn by the lure of an arcade, packed with whistling, banging, singing video games.

Pub doors rattled open. Yawning wide like thirsty mouths to admit a flood of bodies through dry throats; filling empty glass and disco-glittered bellies. The first record of the evening belched through the freshly beer-stained air and out into the dusk.

Where the land meets the sea, in the scummy wet divide of ocean and dry sand, the tide unloads its deep-sea cargo and retreats from the resort's pleasure machine, sliding back in a rattle of pebbles. And by the sea-bitten wood breakwater, the pallbearer of the ocean collects and abandons its dead: Wet strands of brown leathery kelp, cracked shells, starfish, an oil-matted cormorant, the screw-shredded remains of a dolphin, the severed head of a conger eel and the scattered fragments of ten million corpses.

"I can't," said the girl, gazing out to where a darkening sky was fusing with a darkening sea. She sighed. "Not all night."

The boy wrapped an arm about her waist. "Why not? You're not back at school till next Monday."

Her voice was soft. "I know . . . But you know?"

He pulled her close. "There's only me in the caravan till Thursday. Come on . . . And we'll go to the Cavern Disco by the harbor, tonight."

The girl stretched; a decision made. "I don't know. I'd like to." And she began to walk toward the lifeboat slipway. Excited, he sensed her resolution. "Me dad left half a bottle of whisky in the caravan. We'll 'ave that. He won't mind . . . Want a cig?"

As they faded into uncertain silhouettes against the colored lights of the town, something stirred at the water's edge. It quivered and trembled like a stranded fish, gulping the briny air. Wide blank eyes blinked, watered, and then watched. The cars and buses stopped and started along the sea front. Some scooters crackled by. Although unseen, it sensed the great presence of the castle ruins perched on the solid mass of rock which dominated the town.

With waves washing her feet, she rose and wavered as if unsure of her

balance. Then the girl, her feet wetly patting the sand, walked up the beach toward the town. The promenade was busy—people sniffing out inviting pubs, clubs, and theaters. The machines still sang their electric songs but the candy floss stalls, sweetshops and children's amusements had closed for the night. Fish and chip papers scurried across the road, occasionally folding about her ankles. She paused by the red shell of a wartime mine, now meekly collecting pennies for a good cause.

Baring his teeth, the man with the camera and scrabbling fur ball of a monkey approached her—"Hello, luv. Lovely evening"—and threw the monkey at her. Screaming, it kicked, bouncing back onto the man's arm. Tiny black fingers clutched at his lapels and tie.

"Petro! Petro. Go to the nice girl, Petro." The monkey squeaked. "Have your picture taken with Petro, luv. Now move that hair away, we can't see yer face. Petro, go to the nice lady." The monkey clung to him crying. Camera in one hand, he pried the limpet capuchin from him with the other. "It's OK luv. He wouldn't 'arm a—bloody hell! The sod bit me."

The monkey scrambled up onto his shoulders and the man sucked his bloody finger, hissing threats. When he looked up, the girl had gone. Three giggling girls, pink-flushed with martini, were crossing the road. "Hello, my darlings. Lovely evening." He threw the monkey at them. It obligingly cuddled into the scented arms of the redhead.

By shellfish stalls, selling cold bite-size morsels of salted gristle and muscle. Hamburger, hot-dog stalls expelling hot breaths of sausage, onion, and frying smells. More arcades. And as the money bells rang, colored lights flashed in gratitude.

The night wind was blowing cold. Flying in from the dark distances of the sea; sizzling the surf and driving the tattered paper flotsam before it. Some fastened jackets and coats. But most fell back before the chilling breeze to seek refuge in pubs and cafes.

A handful, beerfull and numb, defied the cold ruffling wind and pointed out to sea where a ship was sinking. Or, perhaps, it was the street lights on the far side of the bay. Or they pointed at girls as skirts lifted in the goose-fleshing updraft of air.

A wolf whistle. "Want a cig, luv?"

Another voice. "'Ave a drink of me ale."

"Dunt. He's peed in it!"

One laughed. "He's shy. He really means, will you go to bed with him?"

A voice cut across the babble: "Shut up, Mick! Leave t'poor lass alone. It's all right luv, don't take any notice. They're 'alf cut."

Outside the pub, she paused. A door opened and someone hurried by, dragging some of the odors and the warmth of the public bar with them.



Inside. Black crossbeams segregated the yellow-white walls and ceiling which was hung with polished brass. A beer-colored, cigarette-burn-patterned carpet was beginning to fray. Blue coils of tobacco smoke twisted about the room, occasionally vibrating to the throb of the juke box in the next room. She slipped through the bar, her eyes absorbing the rows of bottles holding amber promises. A tap jetted foaming lager, and the barman's gold-ringed fingers and fingernails clicked against the glass. She sat at a vacant table. Two dozen voices, like waves, washed over her. Submerging her beneath the bubble and hiss of words:

"Another pint of mild, Jack?"

A woman's voice soared into laughter. "You dirty beggar, Harry! He'll get 'imself shot."

Voices fused and dissolved. "I think it's a bit of sunburn. It is. We 'ad a good two hours in the park, this afternoon. I wonder if a bit of cream. You know, Nivea'll bring it out. You should've seen our Janet last year, when she got back from France. Her legs were burnt shocking. Just 'ere below her knees, covered with blisters. Like balloons filled with water."

A match flared in the smoke-soaked air, and wet lips suckled the stem of a pipe. "Did I tell you," said the man, "about that bloke. He lives in the same town as us? Well, one day, when he was at work, local vet phoned him, yer see, and told him to go see him straight way. And on no account go home first. So, this bloke, wondering what's up, goes to vet's and sees he's got his dog—a bloody great alstation. 'What yer doing with me dog?' he asks. Vet tells him a neighbor saw the dog choking in the garden so he took dog to the vet. And vet got some tweezers and pulled out of dog's throat three finger—human fingers. They were stuck, choking the dog. So this bloke phones police and tells them to go to his house. Anyway, when they get there, they find back door open. They searched house and found a man in the bedroom wardrobe. It was a burglar. He'd broken in. Not known there was a dog till it went for him. Only way he could get away was to hide in the wardrobe. But bloody dog got 'old of 'is 'and first, and 'ad three of his fingers."

A crash—splintering glass—jolted the bar silent. "That's one way o' getting art o' washing up," observed the man, his dry smile exposing the yellow chips of his teeth.

"Oh, you and your lip, Freddy. Another quip like that and you're barred, love," retorted the barman, as he kicked the pieces into a corner.

Another voice, lyrical with alcohol, was raised. "A few months ago . . . five or six or so, I heard about someone, who lives near us. His wife bought this big piece of steak. Like that. Big as a plate. Anyway, she cuts it in half. Puts one piece in the fridge and 'as t'other for her dinner. Later

that day she's feeling off it. Poorly. So she tells her husband to get the steak and cook it for 'is supper. He goes to fridge. Opens it. And the meat. This piece of bloody steak fills plate again. It's hanging over the side. And when he looked at it. He saw it was just . . . just moving, like shivering. They took it to the Council offices, and they found it was cancer. Cancer in the meat. And they found where it's touched some sausages, it had like infected them and they were bursting out, splitting their skins. Just think of that. That poor woman'd eaten the meat. And it was just a piece of cancer . . . living cancer."

The night was cold and still when she left the pub. A few people still walked along the promenade. But they hardly strolled; there was purpose and direction in their stride.

In the distance the saline hiss of the men was subdued. Above, the sky was clearing and the light disc of the moon duplicated itself in darkened shop windows. To her left, stone steps ascended into the darkness. And twelve steps up, sat a lad, his face as white as lard. He squirted something from a yellow tube into a polystyrene cup. Then, cupping his hands around it, as if warming them, he raised the cup and rested it against his top lip. He breathed deeply—drawing great lungfuls of cold air and fumes into his chest, which burnt his nose and throat, filling his lungs with fire. A fire that flooded through his body to numb his arms and legs and his soul. Then he dropped back onto his elbows as the solvent fire dissolved his brain.

Somebody coughed and spat. "What a chip, luv?" Two men carrying bouquets of greasy newspaper stood by her side.

"Yer can do better than that, Shillies. 'Ave a bit of his fish. Best bit of cod in Scabs." The gleaming white fragment of fish was clutched in his oil-glossed fingers. "She looks foreign to me. Look . . . She can't understand a word yer say."

The other tapped his head knowingly. "No, I think she's a bit . . . in the head. Even so, she doesn't look bad."

A soft laugh padded into the night. "God knows. Yer can't see her face for all that 'air."

The other's voice dropped to a whisper: "Do you look at the mantel-piece when yer poking the fire?" Throwing away the screwed-up newspapers, they each took an arm and led her up a darkly winding side street. Packed with cars, it was silent. Black windows of houses, like blind eyes, stared hard against the night.

"Here'll do. It's the back yard of that old chippie. No one'll see us." Into the high-walled yard they guided her. Then drew her toward a bed-sized patch of balding grass. "It's my turn first this time, Shillies." Shillies

relinquished his hold on her and moved out of sight behind a shed of sagging boards.

The other pulled her close and her long arms wrapped about him like the white rubber tentacles of an octopus. She opened her mouth as he bent toward her. The silver-gray of her tongue moved, and her teeth were a tightly packed row of blue-black mussels set in white flesh. The shells opened. Mother of pearl flowers. Hypnotized. His lips met her water-cold flesh. Salt pricked his tongue. And the rush and hiss of the sea was in his ears. Bitingly cold brine flushed through him, cascading into his lungs. His mouth jerked open and then was as still and as silent as his cold, dead heart.

Shillies started when she appeared at his side. Softly, he called his friend's name. His voice failed. She was turning her face to his. A strange flat immobile face; the face of a . . . No. No. It was the face of a girl. Her fingers. No, the wet sucker tentacles of a squid, touched his lips—and pressed. He could not resist at they pushed into his mouth, probing his tongue. His mouth yawned wider and wider as the chill hand, then wrist, slipped into his mouth. And smoothly slid into his throat. No air reached his lungs as the arm, as long as death, continued its tight slide through the core of his body. Eternally, working its way along the winding path of his stomach. He could still feel its cold unceasing passage through his saltwater being as he lay face down in a sea of newspaper balls, chip trays, wooden forks and crushed Coca-Cola cans.

Where the land meets the sea. The milk surf rolled up the beach toward the town. And waves moved across a crackling band of pebbles to swirl and bubble about her feet. Then, calmly, she stepped forward into the roaring darkness of the nighttime ocean.

Three-fifths of the world's surface is covered by water. Should the polar ice caps melt, then the sea level would rise dramatically, flooding many hundreds of square miles of dry land.

Where the sea meets the shore. The ocean surged up the beach, rushing, tumbling, cascading, falling, rising toward the dry land.

The tide had turned.

## Mother's Day

Stephen F. Wilcox

*Stephen F. Wilcox writes: "I was born February 5, 1951, right here in Rochester where, except for two years spent in the army, I've lived my entire life. I have a B.A. in journalism and formerly worked as a reporter for one of our local dailies before striking out on my own as a freelance writer. My creative writing efforts are directed toward mystery/suspense stories. I've written two mystery novels, as yet unsold, and have several short stories coming up in Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine. The first will appear in the March issue, the second in April or May. Other pieces are as yet unscheduled."*

*If "Mother's Day" is a fair example of what Wilcox can do, other editors had better start taking a look at their schedules.*

THE TWO-STORY frame house on Madigan Street was fast going to seed. The paint on the old wood clapboards—a diluted yellowish gold seemingly exclusive to aged city houses—had blistered and alligatored from myriad seasons of sun and rain and snow. Not that the rest of the street was in any better shape; an empty wine bottle lay in the storm gutter, a gaggle of candy wrappers rode down the sidewalk on a stiff winter breeze, a rusty Oldsmobile sat perched on cinder blocks in a yard three doors down.

Donald took it all in as he pulled his late-model Chevrolet into the driveway and switched off the ignition. He didn't enjoy coming back to the old neighborhood. Changes came too quickly, often too violently here, and made him feel much older than his thirty-two years. And there was the memory of Father. It dominated the place like an open wound that refused to heal.

But Donald came, because he had to come. It was Saturday afternoon, and Saturday afternoons, nearly every one he could remember, belonged to Mother.

"Lucky Ellen. Smart Ellen," he muttered as he lifted the bulky toolbox from the trunk of his car. Big sister Ellen had married an airline executive

and moved out to Chicago a dozen years before, effectively creating an eight-hundred-mile buffer zone breached only once a year at Christmas.

The steps groaned as Donald climbed to the front porch and crossed to the door, the toolbox swinging at his side. Briefly he inspected the new storm door he had installed the Saturday before and laughed mirthlessly at the red and black sign mother had since affixed to its upper pane. *No Solicitors*. He knocked on the inner door using the code Mother insisted on—shave-and-a-haircut, two bits—and let himself in with his key.

"It's me, Mother. Don't panic," he called out dryly.

"Donnie Bear? Is that you? Come see me."

Donald set the toolbox in the foyer and walked into the living room, taking care not to upset the china cat that rested in the doorway. The room was a study in kitsch; a worn but still serviceable oriental rug, a Victorian sofa incongruously flanked by two striped platform rockers, a wicker basket brimming with skeins of virulently colored yarns, and everywhere ceramic figurines. Cherubs dancing on the windowsills, the Virgin Mother staring down from atop the television set, rearing horses and towheaded little boys and a heroic bust of JFK on the bookshelf. And the big china cat by the doorway.

"I'm in here, Donnie Bear. I haven't been feeling very well the last few days."

He opened the sliding door leading to what had always been the dining room but now served as Mother's bedroom. It was better this way, she insisted, what with her bad hip and the trouble she has climbing stairs and the high cost of heating the whole house these days. The summer before, at Mother's urging, Donald had rehung the door at the top of the stairs and shut down the heating vents to the second floor. The man who bought the heavy oak dining table and hutch had helped him move Mother's bedroom furnishings downstairs.

"Is it the arthritis again, Mother?" Donald asked with all the sincerity he could muster.

She was sitting up in the bed, a checked afghan spread across her lap. "I suppose so. Whatever, it pains me something awful. Just getting old, I guess."

"Nonsense. You'll never get old." But she already has, Donald thought, taking in the crow's feet and denture lines and the scrawny slackness in the skin of her neck and arms.

"Your father would have been sixty-seven last week," she said softly but emphatically.

Donald pretended not to hear. "Angela sends her love."

"I'm sure," Mother sniffed. "Did she sent along a temperance lecture, too?"

"She's not like that, really. It's just that, well, with her own family and the problems they've had with alcohol, she doesn't like to see—"

"Oh, and now I'm an alkie, I suppose? Because I have a little brandy in my tea? She doesn't care that it helps ease my pain a little. Makes me feel like a criminal when I visit you."

Donald sighed. "It's because she cares about your health that she doesn't like to see you . . . overdoing it."

"Well, I don't want to argue about it," Mother said, changing moods. "How's Little Bill? Does he sent his grandma a big kiss?"

"Billy is fine," Donald nodded. He resented it when Mother called his three-year-old son Little Bill. It had been Angela's idea to name the boy William, after Donald's father, and Donald had agreed. But Mother's pointed referrals to "Little Bill" were too much.

Big Bill Heidler, everyone had called his father. A man's man. An outdoorsman of consummate skill and enthusiasm, he bought Donald his first fishing rod when he was only Billy's age and presented him with a .22 rifle of his own on his tenth birthday. Every kid on the block envied Donald that day. Big Bill Heidler. "My boy just may be the best shot in the state someday, you wait and see," Big Bill bragged proudly to his hunting buddies the day Donald shot his first rabbit. But that was long ago, before the accident.

"You planning to finish the house today?" Mother asked.

"Yes. I brought my tools. Actually, I did most of the work last week. All I have left to do is the front door and the living room windows."

"That's good. These fuel bills I've been getting are horrible and we're not even into the worst part of the winter yet." Mother coughed, a dry, affected hacking to emphasize her next remark. "I've been keeping the thermostat way down, like you told me, Donnie, but I don't know. Seems like I'm always cold these days."

"Well, you'll be able to turn up the heat a little once I'm through weatherizing the rest of the place."

"I'd better be. It's not fit to live in, hardly, like this."

"You made the decision to stay here, Mother. We offered to take you in at our place. We could have sold this old house and used the money to build you your own studio apartment off the back of our house."

"Hmmmph. Take me in, all right, like you take in somebody's dirty laundry." She shook her head. "Angela doesn't really want me there anyway."

"That's not true," Donald said. In fact, it was Angela who first suggested the idea to Donald. But Mother didn't know that and wouldn't have believed it had he told her. Angela had married her boy and taken him away from his home, his duties, and Mother would never forget that.

"What would I do way out there?" she asked rhetorically. "The bus line doesn't even go out that far. How would I get to the downtown stores? I'd never see my friends."

"It's only fifteen miles by freeway, Mother," Donald said, exasperation beginning to seep through the calm of his voice. "I've told you before, Angela would take you shopping at the mall near our subdivision. And I could drive you into the city when you wanted to visit with your lady friends." But not every blessed Saturday afternoon, Donald thought.

"It wouldn't be the same." Mother kneaded the edges of the afghan with her spindly fingers, refusing to look up at her son. "This is our home, always. Your father practically rebuilt this place all by himself, in his spare time, when he wasn't out making a good life for us all. He'd never forgive me if I let you move me out of here. He'd roll over in his grave."

There was the specter of Father again, and this time Donald couldn't ignore it. The pain ran too deep; the memories cried too loud. "It wasn't my fault," he said plaintively.

Mother waited a second too long before answering. "I know that. You couldn't help it. I've always known that."

He'd been sixteen years old; half his life ago. November. The early morning had provided a light dusting of snow, as if to aid them in the hunt. He remembered a pewter sky and the sharp cold air, like a knife in his lungs. There was a clearing in the woods, a gently sloping hillock, and beyond that a copse of young birch trees tangled up with wild ivy. Father had circled and gone ahead to flush the buck. Now there came a rustling in the birch grove and a slight movement as the brush parted ahead of Donald. He raised the 12 gauge to his shoulder, a deer slug ready in the chamber. Another movement in the trees. He hesitated a lifetime, and then fired.

"It wasn't my fault," Donald muttered to himself, as he yanked the caulking gun from his toolbox and inserted a tube of elastic sealant. Using a utility knife to cut the tip off the tube, he watched the white goo ooze slowly up the nozzle and he set to work plugging the gaps around the aluminum storm windows.

The house had been quiet for the last two hours while Donald labored to complete the weatherization project. Mother stayed in her converted bedroom, browsing aimlessly through one of the many mail order

catalogues she kept under the bed. She never disturbed Donald when he was taking care of her house. The job moved along at a satisfactory pace; the duty was light this day. Still, Donald couldn't keep his mind on what his hands were doing. The memories wouldn't let him.

It was always like that when he came to the house. He would walk up the front steps and remember when Father had built them to replace the crumbling cement steps that had been there before. He could see the corded muscles in Father's shoulders when he swung the sledge, breaking down the old steps into defeated bits of concrete. He would come into the foyer and see the closet Father had built in the corner and the ten-point antlers, Father's prize kill, mounted above the kitchen door. He would go down to the basement to change a fuse and stumble across the steamer trunk full of battered bowling trophies Father had won and the stacks of yellowed outdoors magazines Father had collected.

Everywhere he looked, Donald saw Big Bill Heidler, the man's man, and himself, a terrified sixteen-year-old boy all alone on a November morning in the woods.

A tragic accident, the minister had said. Instantaneous death due to a gunshot wound in the chest, the coroner had ruled, and the authorities had closed the book on it. At least he didn't suffer, said those who only wanted to be kind. But Donald had suffered, and suffered still with every reminder. He saw Ellen and remembered the accusatory tears. He saw the old neighborhood and remembered the long lines at the funeral parlor. He saw this house and remembered it all. And so did Mother.

"Donnie Bear, how's it going out there?" she called to him from her bed.

"Fine," Donald answered. "I'm just about done."

"I was thinking I might like some tea," she said. "Wouldn't a nice hot cup of tea be good?"

"Sounds great," Donald called out, as he finished caulking the last gap on the last of the living room's three windows. "You take it easy, Mother, and I'll put the water on to boil."

Putting away the caulking gun, he carried his toolbox with him as he passed through the foyer to the kitchen. The tea kettle sat in its usual place atop the massive forty-inch range, the very one Father bought years ago when Donald was seven or eight. He remembered trying to help as Father and the man from the appliance store carried the great white monster into the kitchen, and Father telling him he was too small and that he should just stay out of the way.

Now the big range was old and less formidable somehow; the porcelain enamel was chipped in spots and worn off completely on the rounded



corners. Donald carried the kettle to the sink, filled it halfway with fresh tap water and replaced it on the left front burner. Taking a long wooden match from the box on the counter, he lighted the gas burner and watched, mesmerized, as the blue-orange flame licked the kettle's underside.

A huge roaring bonfire out at the landfill site, a senior class tradition at the old high school. Laughter and taunts as his classmates drank beer from cans and danced wildly around the pyre. Graduation in a week and, when summer ended, off to college at exotic-sounding places like Chapel Hill and Palo Alto. But not for Donald. He would stay home. Mother was all alone now, and she needed him. There would be his old room and menial jobs in restaurants and shoe stores. He would take, but fail, the entrance exam for the police academy. Then the eight long years of night school at City College and the desk job with the area's largest manufacturing firm. Marriage to Angela, the new split level in the suburbs, a family of his own. But always there were the Saturday afternoons at Mother's.

"Here we are, all hot and delicious," Donald announced as he placed the tray on the bedside table and handed Mother her cup of tea. Without comment, she reached below the table and brought up a nearly depleted bottle of blackberry brandy. Donald pretended not to notice when she poured a liberal portion of the elixir into the cup. He recognized the mildly glazed, mildly petulant look in her eyes and he knew what to expect. First she would be combative, then sweet and conciliatory; finally she would sleep, convincing herself when she awoke the next morning that it was the arthritis and assorted other ills—some real, most imagined—that had sapped her strength.

"So you're all done with the weatherization?" she asked, sipping the tea.

Donald smiled, "All finished."

"Took long enough. Two whole afternoons." She squinted up at him. "Your father was a lot handier than you. He'd have done it all in one day and had time to go fishing."

Donald set down his teacup and, struggling to stay calm, said, "Father was good at some things, I'm good at others."

"Your father was a good policeman, too," Mother grumbled. "Everyone in the neighborhood respected Big Bill Heidler. You could have been a decent policeman yourself, if you'd tried. It's what your father wanted, you know."

"I like being a cost analyst, Mother, believe it or not. I'm good at it. Besides, I took the police exam and failed."

"Hmmmph. On purpose, you failed, I know that."

"Believe what you want, Mother. I'm not going to argue with you." Donald stood up. "Anyway, I have to go. Angela and I are going out to dinner with another couple tonight and I have to get home and shower." He gulped down the rest of the tea and turned toward the kitchen door.

To his back, Mother cried. "You'll be back next Saturday, won't you, Donnie Bear? You won't forget?"

"Do I ever forget, Mother? Do you ever let me forget?"

She let the remark pass. "Will I be able to turn up the thermostat a bit now, dear?"

"Yes, Mother. The house is as airtight as I can possibly make it. You should see a difference."

"I appreciate your volunteering to do the job, Donnie, I really do." She was beginning to tire.

Donald returned to the side of the bed and kissed her cheek. "I was glad to do it, Mother. Now, you get some rest. I'll just put the dishes in the sink and let myself out the back."

"You're really a good son, Donnie," she sighed. "Your father would be proud."

Proud? Donald thought as he carried the tray into the kitchen and stacked the dirty cups in the sink. When had Father ever been proud of me, Mother? When was he even satisfied? Eat all your vegetables, Donnie, so you can grow up to be a big strong cop like me. Go out for the football team, son, it'll make a man out of you. Do what I say, be what I am, like what I like. My house, my rules. Get a haircut. Throw away those dirty jeans. Turn down that rotten music. Forget college. Learn to be a man. Caress that rifle, Donnie, and shoot to kill.

It was November again and he was in the clearing. The cold air, the light snowfall, the copse of birch trees ahead. There was the movement in the brush and, as he raised his gun and caressed it with his shoulder, a glimpse of red and black. Then the second movement in the trees. He could see the target clearly now. He hesitated a lifetime as Father turned toward him and raised his arms, anger and fear distorting Big Bill's face. Donald smiled, satisfied, and pulled the trigger.

"It wasn't my fault," he whispered, bending down to pick up the toolbox. "It was fate, pure and simple. Father was meant to die, at that chosen time, in that chosen place. It was just his day." Then, just before

going out the back door to his waiting car and his waiting home and family, Donald reached over to the old forty-inch range and turned on the gas for the left front burner.

“And today,” he smiled, as he went out the door, “is Mother’s day.”

## Lava Tears

Vincent McHardy

*Born April 26, 1955, Canadian writer Vincent McHardy currently lives in Agincourt, Ontario. Those long, cold winters seem to have made for a voracious reading appetite as well as a hot hand at the typewriter. In the last few years McHardy has written a great many short stories, quickly graduating from the amateur press to Night Cry, Borderland, Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine, and various anthologies. Recently he has had the honor of having a story sold to J. N. Williamson's anthology, Cold Sweats, rejected by the publisher. McHardy has completed his first novel, Id Flesh (his agent's title), and is at work on a second, Going Down the Drain. Branching out, another current project is a script, Dream Castles, written for a course given by Phil Hersh—which McHardy also may rework as a novel.*

*Vincent McHardy has appeared in each of the last three volumes of The Year's Best Horror Stories. Here's a writer to watch.*

SILENT AND OVERNIGHT it grew towering and single-minded.

Like I asked. Without warning or tremor. Cracking up under the old Tee-Pee Drive Inn, facing the town and the sea.

Paricutin took Dionisio Pulido's cornfield.

Pet will take my pain.

It will come in beauty. On a clear, hot, late spring Sunday morning. (The first really hot day since Indian Summer.) I can see them now. Grateful for a day off. Nothing to do but sit and eat. Watching the grass and their asses grow fat. Mr. Horance will be out on his bedroom balcony rubbing his Industrial-Arts-Shop nicked hands over the rail. You loved the view. Loved being at the top of the hill. Loved telling people there was no better line of sight in all of Abbots Gate. Well, when you walk out on the balcony (the one that you built with your "own Goddamned hands") take a look at my work. The kid you once offered to take a patch of sandpaper to, to clean up the rough edges. You've been around blocks of wood too long, Mr. Horance. It's not that easy with people. People

don't take well to abrasive treatment. All the nicks and rasps of saw-toothed remarks leave stains. Nothing you can hide with a coat of paint.

For you I'll send something special. Out on the balcony, slack jawed and pulling tight your pajama cord, I'll send a little tremor. Nothing big. It won't smash the house. Just big enough to detach your home-fix-it project and you, send you down the hill over the retaining wall and on to the road. Oh you'll roll well. A big beefy guy like you. It won't kill you. You'll hardly be skuffed. No. The vent will getya. You won't be able to stop rolling. It's quite a steep road. Flapping over and down, there, waiting at the bottom, open mouthed, and orange-red smiling earth mouth, quick as you please, popping you in.

Glorious sight! Wondrous full smells! Like a ladybug under a magnifying glass at noon. Lung and intestine gas expanding, popping you like an overinflated circus balloon. Which is just what you are . . . what you were . . . Mr. Horance. All fluff and no guts. Tight and safe in your sausage skin . . . till I banged you into the oven. Sorry you have to leave so soon. The first at the party. The first to fry away. I wish you could stay to see all the fireworks. But that's for me. I'm calling the shots.

Most of the shots. The special shots. The ones dear to my heart. I don't know all the nine thousand people of Abbots Gate. I don't suppose they're any different from the ones I do know. Quick to jump and point and giggle. Not keeping their nose out of other people's business. Much like spinster Gillard. Not someone I'd pick for a neighbor. Old as coal and not nearly as warm. She spends all the friction of her life cleaning. What for and for whom I don't know. No one ever visits her. If she's not inside dusting the bricabrac, shampooing the rugs and searching for silverfish, she's outside instructing the hired help how to cut the lawn and paint the gingerbread board trim. Generally trying to stretch minimum wage work up to professional standards. No detail of mess escapes her. She'd long since cut down all the trees on her property. Fall no longer preyed on her mind. She spit her vinegar on neighbors who neglected to catch their own tree leaves as they fell. The sins of others carried on the wind to land on her lawn. She'd have covered her house in plastic were it not for the cost.

And for all that I wouldn't have minded. If she kept to herself. Played out her own nightmares in the dark. But she needed me. Spread the pain. Sighted me in her cross hairs every time circumstances offered a choice shot.

"It is all a question of hygiene, diet, and moral persuasion," she'd say, "It's all so very clear. I've never seen you washed or with combed hair. Running, playing and weeping sweat demands care! And diet! That

candy bar in your shirt pocket tells me all I need to know . . . And morality! Teenagers today. Do you know the word? I think not. Lord, do you think you invented . . . it?

“It is up to you, Tom. You have only yourself to blame.”

A small sermon but one she never tired of repeating, embellishing, thundering down at me. Though I tried to hide whenever I saw you drifting close I could never run clear of your evangelical selfrighteousness. Like a vengeful Nuee ardent, a tumbling, superheated multi-legged, glowing cloud covering all before it.

So . . . for you dust. A blizzard of gray-pink corruption. Choking down your chimney and seeping through windows and key holes. Dust will plop on your starched white linen bed sheets, cloak your sitting room, and crust your Daulton figurines into lumps. Windows will plague over. And those delicate Spanish lace curtains will change into pillars of clay.

You’ll spend a frenzied last minute. What to clean first before you fill up and gag-stop?

There’s a question. What will you do? Nothing important. You never did anything important in the thousands of minutes gone by; why change at the end? When your numbing nothings are collected together you’ll die alone, forgotten. This way with me you’ll die for a reason. All of you together, bowing at the coronation of a king. Bright baubles for my crown. The day will dawn a new Christmas lighting the world I control.

A Christmas Clarence and his crowned teeth won’t be around to laugh at. Clarence, who liked to call himself the town’s second ugliest boy after me. Well, he wasn’t so unhappy about being the second ugliest. He was happier that I was the first.

“I’ll get these off someday,” he’d say, tapping at his grill work mouth of braces. “I’ll have a straight smile. I’ll be human. But you’ll never change.”

Clarence! You look like an apple stuck on a stick. Removing the braces won’t change you into a swimwear model. Relieved of your metal armor you’ll be forced to cringe from your second worse feature. What to choose, your wide-spaced slightly off-center eyes, your curved spine, or your bootlike ears? Picky. Picky. Picky. Number two on your Deformity Hit Chart clearly will be a sell out.

If those braces bother you so much I’ll remove them. I’ll open a new world for you. My secondary court jesters will come calling. Lightning will serve you. St. Elmo’s fire will dance and play your teeth. The electrical wind will heat and wash those braces away. Why worry about crooked teeth when you have a black hole for a face?

To hell with fashion. It was never a love of mine, not even a flirt. But

my Love's love was fashion. Sue would throw up if she ever heard me say that or even think that I thought that we could ever be called lovers. She vomits quite a bit as it is with all those diuretics she takes to keep the weight off. I'm not complaining. I love her trim shape. The body swells just enough to hold her dresses and slips from an embarrassing fall. Fashion on her worked. She spent so much time and money on those clothes. Months would pass without her repeating a costume. Snuggly woolens for winter ice breezes; cottons for summer. So climate threw her off pace. She snapped rain and snow and desert blows into line. She slipped on a breeze of whims. Her hair the crest of fashion—teased, flipped, curled, straight, a ribbon, flowers, henna and a highlight or two. A wondrous panorama of change and reward for the attentive watcher.

And Oh, how I watched.

When she walked to and from school. When she went out on dates. Especially on dates. I always followed. Never seen. In shadows, from laneways and behind shrubs. Even into the hills where she'd go with Frank, Dave and more recently Bill. Even when she was so careful not to be followed, so fearful of being seen and caught . . . I saw. I heard. And after, when they'd leave laughing, I touched the mucus wetness where they'd lain.

For you Sue a whirlwind. A short, surgical puff that will leave you blind, naked, and hairless. The whirlwind could bake you and eat you to the bone. But I want my pretty mannequin to come crawling over matchstick bodies and broken sidewalk slabs. I'll not turn you away. And you won't be able to laugh and turn your nose in disgust when I look at you.

Oh my children. What a toasting it will be! Bodies pushed up against dead-end streets like twigs caught in a sewer grating, hot mud pack for the terminally wrinkled, asphyxiation for the smoker and non-smoker alike.

All this and more.

One I'll save, Hank, the supermarket butcher's helper. Of all the high and low of Abbots Gate I'll keep Hank cool and comfortable while all the rest fry. In the freezer down with the beef sides and plucked chicken you'll keep until later. So you have an IQ of 70 and you lost your job at the stockyards because you molested the death row cows, I don't care. We talked. Or rather I talked and you listened. You didn't talk much. Was it because you were too stupid to jeer? Is that it?

Least you listened. For your silence you'll live. Play with all the bodies you want. After I'm through there will be enough for even your appetite.

We both know what loneliness can do.

Abbots Gate will feel my need. My cresting rhythmic beat. My deep spasms. My controlled, confident impulse. My . . .

They won't know who. It will be my secret. But they'll feel it. Know it like a slap on the face. My mark will free all your cloth covered places, your blushing birth marks, your freckled stretch marks and ingrown toe nails. Left breast too small, mismatched, not at all? Going to fat? Your gums bleeding plaque? One testicle not distended? I'll see it. No creams or soaps can fool me. Trusses and wrappings and bags over heads will come off. I'll see you ugly to the bone.

And he watched. From the edge of the woods he watched the people stroll through MacGreggor Park. And as he watched, and selected, he chewed at the corners on his fingers. His nails were almost gone. What was left was so reduced it was impossible to find an edge to work from. His hand wound throbbed with a new kind of pain. Not at all like the shameful bathroom picking pain but rather an ethereal exalting freeing pain. These carvings called for hope.

Tom stopped gnawing. His hands tumbled to his side. The moment was here. There was no mistake. No words. His feet led him along the forest edge. Tom walked with a purpose. And he didn't walk alone.

In the half dark, Sam Tullage judged the fallen log to be two feet high. It was three. So when he lifted his leg and spotted his flashlight farther into the woods and stepped . . . he tripped. The ground was as unkind as his fellow searchers' comments.

"I think Big Foot got him," Mike Resnick said from somewhere to the left.

"Undigestible!" Steve responded. "Sam's got a bottle. You've been holding out on us, haven't you?" Brushing aside some spindly ash saplings, Steve saw his prostrate friend.

"You're lucky you won't be carrying me out of here. I could have snapped my leg. Give us a hand."

Mike walked in on the two just as Sam bent down and reached out with his hand.

"Oh, my God! A snake!" Steve cried.

Charged with a vision of his own painful, lingering death, Sam jumped up and bleated, "Kill it!" He then proceeded to tango from one unstable perch to another, finally ending up on the log that had tripped him.

"Well, he can move when he wants to," Steve said. He cradled his shotgun across his arms and steadied his flashlight on Sam.

"Go on. Give the snake a good view," Sam yelled. He looked down to



where his gun had fallen. The ferns and the tangled dead branches of forest floor seemed all to move like worried fingers over a knotty problem. His discarded flashlight underlit the ferns making a beacon where the night insects crawled.

"Come on, Sam. There is no snake." Mike kicked the spot with his Cougars. "Steve's just wasting our time."

"Christ!" Sam scrambled down. "I'm not out here for my health. If I wasn't a volunteer fireman I'd be home in front of the tube."

"Wouldn't we all." Steve looked up through the forest canopy searching for a star. It was black. The only light came from their flashlights. The wind blew. Sending the oak and maple leaves twisting and surging. The pines provided a low background hiss. Blending well with the more boisterous deciduous woodwinds. All creaked under the communal strain.

"Look at it. There's going to be a storm. Let's go back."

"Can't. We promised to work to the beach then north up to Battleman Ridge. Then . . ."

" . . . over to Wayburn farm," Sam interrupted Mike. "But that's at least fifteen miles. We'll be drowned rats by then." Steve spat.

"Do what you want." Sam pulled out his Scout Masters compass. "Over there is the sea." He motioned. "I can't depend on mad ducks like you to lead us out of here." Snapping back branches and letting them swish back uncontrollably he pressed on.

"You know she's probably hitched out of this dead-end town," Sam said as he dodged a branch. "There's nothing here to keep 'um. I'd run if I were her."

"If you had kids you'd know why we're out here." Mike said.

"I'm careful. Not like you guys who get all excited on a Saturday night. Whoooo-boy! Let's rip some panties."

"Are you sure you don't have any kids?" Sam said.

"Stella's a damned liar. Are you going to take the word of some cheap . . ."

"Okay. Calm down. That's not a stick you're waving around." Sam laughed and picked up the pace.

"We're fools out here scaring the frogs and toads." Steve felt reassured on this topic. "I tell ya. That tail hightailed out of here."

"Cheer up, Steve. Call this Community PR. There are only two gas stations in town. If word got out that you backed out of your civic duty . . ."

"I'm here! Aren't I? I'm going to catch a cold just like everyone else."

Just because I grump when some horny teen scents an out-of-town pair of jeans . . .”

“Right. It’s your town. You love it, wouldn’t leave it for the world,” Mike said.

“Right.”

Mike shook his head and smiled at the ground. “How much farther? The air’s getting pretty thick back here.”

“Close.”

The forest had changed as they moved. The trees were thicker, shorter, and closely packed. Whereas before the wind raced high up in the branches, here the wind sped along the ground picking up needles and dirt. Now, added to the mix of wind, branch and leaf sounds, came water. The break of surf gathered tempo and power as they walked. A blue, ever so faint, woolly glow clung to the low shrubs. The sea grumbling grind groans drowned out the tree whispers as the three stumbled onto the beach.

They faced the sea. Flashlight beams skipped out over the water like poorly thrown flat stones drying thirty feet from shore. The Atlantic kicked and bit the beach. The long white lip of surf pouted and unfurled. The water would push up higher before morning.

“Tomorrow I’m beachcombing. No telling what will wash up.” Steve looked happy for the first time tonight.

“Squid. Jellyfish. Tin cans,” Sam said.

“Viking loot. I’ve seen the old boat moorings carved in solid granite.”

Sam let out an exaggerated sigh. “That hustler Arty drilled those holes to catch ape dumb tourists. Did you ever wonder why those holes just happened to be beside his marina and nowhere else?”

“How the hell do I know what Vikings did?” Caught out again Steve turned his collar up.

“Let’s move,” Mike said. “They’ll be sending out a search party for us if we aren’t at Wayburns in an hour.”

Steve snorted. Sam laughed to himself. Though it was late and the sky overcast, a faint glow attended their walk. Somewhere above, a moon shone giving just enough radiation to contrast the sea from the sky. But the pines were a mountain. Crowding the beach, backing it into the sea, you felt you could only enter the forest on its terms. For a time they walked in silence. The surf lip curled up on the sand, sucking back, and trailing a senile froth. Eyes on stalks threw back the searchlight probes as crabs picked the scum. The ocean worried the men’s nerves. It grumbled like some Titan grinding monstrous marbles in a tired hand. Low and constant, after a while the listener doesn’t realize the sound still

pounds. The experience becomes systemic. Indistinguishable from internal gurglings.

A northwesterly picked up, lifting the sea foam and sprinkling the men.

Steve pulled his collar tighter. "Damn. It was such a nice day today. Now this."

Mike sniffed the air. "Spring. It's up and down."

Mike sniffed again.

"Fire!" Sam said what Mike thought.

Up ahead the beach curved out to the sea, stopped at a point, then doubled back on the other side. Cooked cedar-pine resins and charcoal carried from behind the tree line from the other invisible beach.

Wet sand fought their running boots. Dancing flashlights turned the landscape into a rush of erratic motion. Stumps and stones jumping into view. Dodging back into shadows. Now, almost at the point, they slowed. Lighted trees barred their way. Red-yellow-orange a bonfire painted their way onto the beach. Tom sat cross-legged in front of the driftwood fire, watching the fire crawl up white bleached tree limbs and the embers pile higher. With his back to the men he looked like a Buddhist supplicant drowning in the mysteries of a waterfall.

Sam stepped forward. "Hey. You there."

Tom turned his head. His face caught the flickering rage of the fire, exposing his Dresden bombed nose, jumping into sharp relief his Plain of Jars cheeks and deepening the irregular purple-red gougings of his lunar pockmarked forehead. A small strand of hairs grew from the remnant of a chin. More numerous, the hairs of his patchy mustache helped define where his upper mouth ended and his lower lip started. So many months of fingers prying out blackheads had blurred the line. Possibly because he sat so close to the fire his face glistened with a prodigious amount of sweat.

As Mike and Steve entered the circle of light they flinched almost on cue. Tom smiled a knowing smile. He'd seen that look many times before. It was an old and dear friend.

Hesitating just long enough to be rude, Sam said, "Has anyone been by?"

Tom shook his head. The lighting shifted the shadows on his face, giving the effect of tiny bugs continually crawling about, warmed by the fire to excess.

"I thought not." Sam forced a smile.

"Not a bad set-up," Steve unwelcomely interjected. "You've almost got it right. Great fire, romantic setting, but where's the beer and girls?"

"I'm too young to drink." Tom quickly looked back at the fire. He poked the embers with a shovel deepening the cavity beneath the logs.

"Come on Steve. Cut it out. Let's get going." Mike grabbed his arm. "Have a good time. And be sure to put out the fire when you leave."

Sam lingered behind. "If a girl, Bonnie Camford is her name, happens to come by, would you tell her to go home. Her parents are worried. Okay? Would you do that for me?"

"They've got nothing to worry about." Tom didn't turn around. "She's in a far better place than here."

That's what Steve keeps telling me, Sam thought as he walked to join the others. "Just remember what I said."

Catching up he was in time to hear Steve say, "Brother, does that bring back memories." He gave a mock shudder. "When he smiled I was afraid I'd get squirted."

"You could have laid off of that crack about girls," Mike snapped.

"Fun and games. He'll grow out of it."

"Not likely. Those scars are for life."

"That's just too bad," Steve pricked. "He may look like the dog's dinner but he doesn't have to act like one. If he offered me some food, I would have been more sociable."

"He didn't have any food," Sam said.

"What's the matter? You've got a cold? He was cooking something, pork or chicken. Probably potatoes and corn on the cob. The smell was everywhere."

Sam looked at Mike.

"I smelled something."

"Sure." Sam looked back at the now distant fire. "You get some tin foil, butter and season the inside, drop the meat in, seal it and bury it in the fire. You've got to be careful not to burn it. Turn it once or twice . . . Voila! A feast fit for a king." Steve stopped talking, quite satisfied he'd awakened hunger in Sam.

Sam flashed his light on the ground he'd just walked. An odd dull look crossed his face. Discounting their own recent tracks and Tom's, the sand held a mystery. "Look at that," Sam pointed. "Here we walked." He traced the path with light. "Over there Tom came from the forest . . . dragging something . . ."

"I told you. The kid's a pig-out. Wouldn't be friendly . . ."

"Hey! Where you going?" Steve yelled at the running Sam.

Sam took a deep breath. Later after he finished digging, he'd take another.

Steve was outside watering the lawn that Sunday morning when officer Marincheck pulled by the curb.

"Steve, about your statement," he said through the rolled-down window.

After adjusting the sprinkler and dodging the spray Steve jogged over. "You got Mike's and Sam's. Why'd you need me?"

"Orders. You know how it is. Push this paper. Stamp this. I'll give you a ride to the station."

Steve tapped the car roof. "Okay. Let's do it. Just let me move the water. I got this damned maple tree with yellow leaves, I woke up this morning and there it was yellow leaves."

"If it's not one thing, it's another," the cop agreed.

In the car Steve welcomed the shade. Today was going to be a scorcher. "I didn't have much to do last night. Sam's the hero. If heroes find bodies."

"He saved us a lot of man hours. We're grateful."

"I am too. No telling what that nut would do next. You should have seen him scream when old Sammy tore into that fire. Spitting and cursing about virgins, Gods, sacrifices and volcanoes. I'll sleep better knowing that creep's behind bars."

"Ain't it the truth." They stopped at a red light. "She must have been horrible to see."

"She was." Steve tapped the side window. "But she sure smelled good. Something like pork."

"Will you look at that," Steve directed. All along the roadside the trees were tinged yellow. "It's spreading. Must be some damned blight."

The light turned green and they drove off. They could still ride the roads. The rising heat had yet to buckle them.

## Rapid Transit

Wayne Allen Sallee

*This is a rare piece of prose fiction from Wayne Allen Sallee, who is primarily a poet—and I think you'll agree that having had 136 poems accepted for publication in the past two years does qualify one as a poet to be reckoned with. Born September 9, 1959 in Chicago, Sallee explains that "Rapid Transit" was written for his final paper at the University of Illinois, where he received a B.A. in English Literature. Just now he works as a credit analyst in Chicago.*

*Sallee's poems have appeared in Cat's Eye, Fire, Blue Light Review, Comet Halley, Calliopes Corner, Impetus, and many other publications. He has also written reviews for Castle Rock, two screenplays, a 61-page poem entitled "Desmond's Inferno," and is at work on a novel, Paingrin: The Biography of Randall Andrew Sink. And he has written a follow-up to "Rapid Transit" entitled "Take the A Train."*

WAITING FOR THE Douglas L on the final day of Indian summer, Dennis Cassady saw the woman slowly and relentlessly knifed to death in the field below the platform. He had been standing, unaware, for several minutes, thinking about whether or not he should take the weekend off and boogie up to Milwaukee to catch the third game of the Series (since, let's not kid ourselves, if he lived to be friggin' ninety, the Cubs would still be looking at first place like a fourteen-year-old pimply-necked kid with one hand buried deep in his pants, drooling over the Playmate of the Month), and not until he looked down the tracks for the train did he notice her. She had not made a sound. He was standing behind a billboard that advertised a brand of cigarettes. The legend below the ad read: *True. You found it.* He realized with a sudden twinge of morbid fascination, which went sliding down his back like an ice cube on a hot day, that he had a perfect view.

The woman's jeans—he was sure that she had to be in her mid-twenties—her jeans were pulled down to her knees, and blood was running in fine rivulets down one thigh. The Western Avenue sodium vapor lamps

cast a violet haze on the field, the kind of haze that you see at dusk in the summer if rain is on the way, and it made the blood appear livid and oily.

Her breasts were large, but he could not tell if she was attractive: her face was twisted in fear, eyes widened, nostrils flared, blonde hair matted with dirt. All of this surrounded a black pit of a mouth from which no sound came. Cassidy's eyes drifted back to her spread legs and perfect thighs, they really were perfect, except for that ugly stream of blood that largely resembled a doctor's El Marko outline of some old bag's varicose vein.

The twinge he had initially experienced became stronger; he felt as if his entire body was starting to fall asleep. It ran across him in waves, like that time he had gotten hypnotized at Dilligaf's. The "mesmerist extraordinaire" (he called himself that; the guy was really just a two-bit showoff in a bouffant toupee) had said to Cassidy: "You are getting *sleepy*. You feel a *tingling* in your fingers, a *tingling* in your toes . . ." and shit like that. He sounded like a queer, and Cassidy ended up hypnotized into "becoming" Neil Diamond, kissing old women and running the microphone cord up and down his crotch.

But he wasn't falling asleep. He felt both excitement and curiosity at what was happening below him; how things were going to turn out. He felt the same as people must feel, who slow down their cars at the scene of an auto wreck, or who mill about the aftermath of a grocery store robbery, to see how many times the fifty-year-old Polish immigrant had been shot after his till had been emptied, and to maybe get their faces on the five o'clock news.

He didn't need his face on the news; not at all.

Cassidy thought about that Don McLean song that he and Sarah had listened to in high school. *I feel the trembling tingle of a sleepless night . . .*

Only the girl in the song had chestnut-colored hair *that fell across her pillowcase*.

The field below was in the process of becoming the early stages of a project about which Cassidy knew nothing. A lime-green construction shack with *Myers and Sons, Winnetka* printed in three-dimensional blue on its side stood at the far end of the field. Beyond that was the monolithic overpass of the C & NW Railroad. The railroad tracks ran beneath the L about twenty feet up; the two sets of ties cut the field off effectively and almost completely. He heard the man below him grunt—the sound of a car with a dead battery being turned over.

Maybe the woman will be lucky and the guy *will* have a dead battery,

Cassady thought, then she wouldn't end up in a Michigan Avenue abortion clinic telling the doctor: "Yes, it was my boyfriend, and yes, I know I should have come in sooner, but—" "—you were embarrassed, right? Well now, don't *worry*, just rest your feet in these stirrups; the hose won't hurt *too much* . . ."

The people who worked at the building from nine until six-thirty made picture frames. Moonlight splashed across third-floor windows; he could vaguely make out a small bottle of Jergens hand lotion, a miniature sentry that seemed to stare at him from the window sill. All the windows seemed to stare at him.

A nearly deserted CTA bus advertising *Nobody Does It Better: Channel Two News at 5, 6 & 10* split the night, droning by within ten feet of the two figures in the field. The driver's eyes mirrored the unblinking darkness of the building's windows, as they stared straight ahead toward the North Side and better neighborhoods.

The man—Christ! Cassady had paid hardly any attention to him at all—looked up as the bus hissed on. He had a full and unshaven face, white hairs spotted his beard. Broad shoulders pushed out from a checkered shirt, and his soiled shirttails were dangling out of the open fly of his Wrangler jeans. The man was wearing a pair of red Keds basketball sneakers that made squishing noises as he shifted his weight in the muddy tire tracks on the ground. His teeth were crooked.

Cassady was captivated by the clarity with which he saw these things. It was as if he were sitting in the sixth-row aisle seat in the Colony theater, secure in the darkness, stuffing popcorn into his mouth as some B-movie starlet is hacked at by some B-movie slasher.

The woman kicked at the man, who was still looking toward the street. He stumbled backward, howling, more out of surprise than anger. The woman staggered to her feet, jeans still bunched at the knees. The two moved in a drunken *pavanne*, the man trying to regain his balance, his arms flapping at the air; the woman attempting to turn away, her mouth now resembling a gaping wound.

Later, Cassady would remember everything that followed as happening with a cruel slowness, as if the field had been invisibly flooded with glycerine. Everything that followed, *everything*, ripple of muscle, ripping of flesh, blinking of eyes, expanding and contracting of lungs as air was inhaled and scream was expelled, all happened in slow motion, separate frames in a great motion picture. He could almost see himself breathing in slo-mo.

The man came forward again, a knife suddenly in his left hand—Cassady thought of a stiletto his father, a retired Monroe Street cop, had



shown him once; when he flicked the release button a six-inch blade jumped out uncaringly, capable of slicing flesh and bone alike, press it into somebody's back*snnikt!* and their spinal cord is severed like so much butter. He heard the slow whirring of the movie projector again.

The woman took three steps backward before falling to the ground with a wet thud. A streetlamp near the corner flickered twice and went out. The man's arm descended in jagged flashes, as if a piece of film was slowing down and speeding up spasmodically, or maybe the scene below had been poorly edited and hastily shipped out for viewing to reap whatever profits could be made. The huge knife ripped twice into the woman's right breast.

Blood, a rich purple color in the streetlamp's haze, flowered across her blouse. A third thrust, this one accompanied by a miserable sucking sound as if the knife had entered the exact same entry hole as the previous stab, and the purplish blood sprayed out in all directions, and had the effect of a water hose being turned on with a thumb over the nozzle. The man was drenched, his pants and shirt had been streaked shiny in places, and the ejaculation of blood drove him into an even greater frenzy.

*Then, only then,* did the woman scream. It was the sound of something trapped—a child camping with his parents wanders into a foxtrap, which snaps around his tiny leg, crushing tiny bone. The rabbit staring into the muzzle of the shotgun. The mother who answers the phone angrily at two in the morning, starting to say "Can't you at least call if—" and being interrupted by the police captain.

Her arms wrapped frantically around her chest, clamping her life back in.

As her scream skittered down the empty street into the gutters and alleys, the man punched her below the right eye, and Cassady heard her nose break. It was muffled, like the sound of a pretzel being bit in half inside your mouth. Her skin began to swell, darkening her mascara, which had already begun to run, minutes before. Not from tears, but from the man's spit.

He pulled her hair and her head snapped brutally forward, and then he casually let it drop back with a dull crack. All of this was of course happening in slow motion, the moonlight washed through the woman's blonde hair as her head fell back, and Cassady thought of a line from a Richard Lovelace poem: *Shake your head and scatter day . . .* What an absurd—

The woman screamed again.

The sound slapped Cassady's awareness with the intensity of his radio

alarm, going off to WBBM Hot Hits each morning. After the initial onslaught of the Go-Go's or Toni Basil singing about Mickey, whatever dream-thoughts still slumbered in his head disappeared when he dipped his contacts in icy tap water before putting them in, and he was left staring at reality: reflected in the bathroom mirror, a shabby two-room flat, and more clearly, a twenty-four-year-old man who looked older than he really was.

Cassady looked into the mirror in front of him and saw the knife high in the air. *This is really happening*, he thought. *I can still save her!* And he moved backward, quickly and quietly, past the *Creepshow* billboard that some half-assed Rembrandt had retouched in marker so that the cockroach coming out of E. G. Marshall's mouth was instead a giant black penis, past the small blue sign that gave the hours of arrival and departure for the Douglas trains, and he was finally at the phone and the man wasn't coming after him and the phone felt cold in his hand and there were initials carved into the wood of the bench next to him that said Juice L's LaVon and Latin Kings Rule and he dialed 911 and

All of this happened in little over three seconds in Cassady's mind. He was rooted where he stood like a corpse in its grave. He badly wanted to urinate.

The man dropped the knife straight into the woman's mouth.

It fell o god it fell ever so slowly. Straight down, like the swan dive of an Olympic swimmer. It fell, and Cassady saw the veins sticking out in the man's wrist, he held the knife so tightly. Knuckles white. Like her eyes. White and huge, the one had had been beaten purple looked as if it had been painted into its socket.

And the knife fell, and there were images of that 60 Minutes show on slomo filming and that shot of the drop of milk falling with the camera recording every 1/1000 of a second—the drop so gracefully falling into the dish and the splattering milk formed a tiny crown and one tiny globe stood balanced in dead center with a thin tongue of white reaching to pull it back down.

Cassady would remember later dreaming of the sound that the knife made when it ripped through the woman's tongue. It was like the sound the dentist's air hose makes when it is in your mouth and you have to swallow. Violet blood flew out of the mutilated mess that had been her mouth a moment before. The smell of blood filled the air and worked its way into Cassady's mouth. He tasted copper, and his own bile, deep in his throat.

The woman hitched out a cough. Another, convulsively. The man sliced her throat from ear to ear. He was smiling. The wind caught the

sharp odor of pickles and onions from the Wendy's several blocks down. Black pools welled up in the sockets of the woman's still staring *O god why couldn't he have just raped me and masturbated in my face instead of KILLING me* eyes. One hand clawed lifeless etchings into the mud. The man replaced the knife through his belt loop into an invisible holster, its blade grinning wickedly, and

he walked away. He simply walked away. Twenty minutes had passed, according to the flashing neon Seiko sign down the block.

The train pulled in several minutes after the red basketball sneakers had shrunk to a pinpoint and then to nothing in the darkness. Cassady walked disjointedly down the aisle of the last car, his ankle-length trenchcoat slapping against the seats. He was surprised that it was crowded, filled with simpering suburbanites intent on following the Governor's orders. *Because of the rail strike, leave work a little early or stay a while longer, so we can all spread the rush hour out more, and hopefully, etc.* Hopefully you'll get re-elected, right? Asshole.

And so, no doubt about it, everybody piles on to the 7:03, just like housewives throughout North Lawndale say to their husbands, "Honey, it's 8:00, let's get Junior's cords now and avoid the crowd." And without a fucking doubt, Cassady spends the last hour of work wishing he were anywhere but Jeans 'N Things.

He nearly tripped over a toad of a man sitting virtually on top of the doors. Thin, a scarecrow in a three-piece suit. Sunken shoulders, bony knees and ankles touching (as if he was a turkey trussed up for somebody's, probably his boss's, Thanksgiving dinner), eyebrows perched atop black plastic Sears Optical frames and neck muscles protruding from an ill-fitting collar twitched together in a mad fugue. A Cicero-Berwyn businessman working late. He smelled of Brut 33 cologne.

In the last seat, next to the conductor's booth, a pregnant black woman gazed out at the rooftops passing just below eye level. A small boy with huge brown eyes and a Walter Payton t-shirt sat tugging at her faded blue sweatshirt, vying with the dirt on the tenements for his mother's attention. Their clothes said off-the-rack Zayre's, and their faces had 18th Street written into every sad wrinkle, and in the dirt under their fingernails, too.

Cassady was able to get a seat in the back of the car. He slid down next to a man in work boots reading (most likely with some degree of difficulty, he thought) the new Robert Ludlum novel. Across from him sat two elderly women, one with a purple babushka wrapped around her head, both their faces buried deep in *The National Enquirer*. The head-

lines screamed to enquiring minds everywhere: *Liberace Bombshell!*, and in smaller print beneath: *Boyfriend Tells All!* Cassady remembered reading a headline from one of those tabloids once—his mother used to call them her “supermarket magazines,” just like she used to call those idiotic soap operas her “afternoon stories”—and it said that Jerry Lewis was a UFO clone.

“My, my, that Prince Andrew going out with that Koo actress, and he just *had* to know that she appeared *nekkid* in those movies,” Purple-Babushka said. The cloth was wrapped so tightly about her head that her eyebrows were pulled back on her forehead like Mr. Spock’s. “His *poor* mother, the Queen!” her friend lamented, her withered hand touching her cheek in actual concern. She was wearing whore-red nail polish, cracked in places. “What is this world coming to?”

Look around you and see, lady, Cassady thought. See if anybody cares that some woman was cut to pieces tonight and you all passed her right on by and

*I saw it happen!*

none of you even bothered to look out of the window. Too caught up in your own damn lives and your own damn problems. Somebody could have seen the—*her*—body.

Hell, nobody was even looking at him.

Down the aisle, somewhere, a kid had his Sony Walkman turned too loud, and John Cougar was singing about Jack and Diane sucking down chilidogs outside a Tastee-Freez. Go for it, Jack-boy.

Cassady shut his eyes.

“... say, hey, Diane, let’s go off behind a shady tree . . .”

How about an L overpass, Jacky-boy, that’ll do the trick. Cassady could almost hear the sound of his own thoughts. He had an urge to laugh, loud and without reason. A madman’s laugh.

And what could he have done about it anyway? His ears rang.

“... oh yeah, life goes on . . .”

You talking to me, Jacky-boy? Cassady’s mind was a black hole, and, except for the song, every single sensory feeling, the cold metal he rested his hands on, the smell of a pipe three seats up, even the old ladies’ talk, was sucked into his brain and pulled into swirling blackness at thought-speed. It was like when you’re walking down the street, maybe thinking the girl you’re seeing, and you don’t even realize that you’re walking or that your legs are moving up and down at each curb; you turn down the right street without even looking at the sign and you only know that she throws her head back when she laughs and when she wears her red headband it drives you crazy . . .

Outside, away from his mind, shadowed buildings passed by at breakneck speeds. The floor of the car vibrated with the tempo of the rails underneath. Except for the armchair-espionage spy next to him and the two mental cases across the aisle, everybody sat with vacant stares, their heads bobbing in rhythm with the motions of the car like empty beer cans floating in the water off Oak Street beach, their eyes staring noncommittally at their reflections, washed black by the night beyond the rhomboid-shaped windows.

Inside, Cassady saw the woman's face, the man's face, with its twisted grin, grotesquely out of proportion, as if an egg-beater had been stuck in the middle of their faces, funhouse faces like the ones at the beginning of *Night Gallery*, leering . . .

" . . . long after the thrill of livin' is gone . . . "

Go to hell, Jacky-boy.

The train made a hissing sound as it slowly pulled into the Central Park station, jolting Cassady's awareness as abruptly as a cop's nightstick jabs the wino on the park bench out of his drunken slumber. Cassady found that he had been staring at the "Life in These United States" signs lining the car, furnished as a public service by *The Reader's Digest* for your reading enjoyment.

He was one of a handful of people who were either poor enough or stupid enough to get off the train, the quality of the neighborhood being what it was, sprawled beneath him in two-dimensional decay, gang slogans in carnival colors sprayed on every shuttered and burnt-out building. He stood alone, hands gripping the railing, the wood rough on his fingers, and let the wind that carried the copper smell of blood into his nose twenty blocks east blow gently through his hair.

He looked down at his hands. They were strong, able hands, nails neatly trimmed. He began to examine a small scab on his right hand, just below the knuckles, a product of a careless slip of the razor while shaving. Methodically, like an old man whittling wood, he scratched at it until a tiny sliver flaked off. He stared at the ugly red skin beneath. Stretching the skin tautly with his other hand, he watched a small bubble of blood rise to the surface. The blood was thick; Cassady felt the sharp sting of nausea begin a slow pulse in his nose. Black patches grabbed at the corners of his eyes. His stomach heaved, and he was running down the steps two at a time, dumbly thinking that every time his feet hit the stairs and then the concrete, his socks were sliding farther down his calves. He felt his throat getting all gummy, and he knew it wouldn't be long before he threw up, like the time he downed a pint of Yukon Jack on Vic Raciuna's dare and gave Vic's car a new set of seat covers. That had been

outside of Lorenzo's, a Greek lounge on Halsted Street, where the owners called everybody "my friend" and the whole place smelled like gyros, and Cassady wished to fuck that he was there right now.

He fumbled for his front door key, his bladder doing a fast boogaloo. Blood poked through his scab again. The light in the foyer reflected off of it, made it look like spittle in a baby's mouth. He retched all over himself.

It rained the next day. Cassady threw up several times in the morning; the taste of bile stayed in his mouth. He could taste it when he belched. He stared vacantly out of his window at life progressing down Ogden Avenue. Faces in doorways were kept dry by yesterday's racing forms, waiting for the rain to stop so their daily crap games could begin. A hunkered-down old man, the rain seeming to beat him into the ground, waited patiently for the bus, his eyes gently watching two young boys who did not know what rheumatoid arthritis was splash playfully in the puddles. The sky did not have a horizon: it was a bowl of smokestack-gray that was smacked down on top of everything, and as the afternoon progressed into early evening, the rain quickened, ripping its way through the trees, tearing autumn's last remains and smashing it to the ground in lifeless piles.

Through all of this, Cassady sat and watched as the rain beat against his window and eroded lines into his reflected face. Behind him, on the Quasar television set that he had bought hot last summer on Maxwell Street, Eddie Haskell was calling The Beaver a little runt.

He was holding the cockroach in his hand. Had been for quite some time. He held it firmly between his thumb and forefinger; its legs hung limp. Cassady raised it to eye level; the roach met his stare with little disdain. He had found it creeping through the shadows of his kitchen. *Remind you of someone you know?* a dark voice had asked. NO! Cassady's mind overrode the dark voice and his eyes squeezed shut.

When he opened them, a million years after the knife's grin became too much to bear, he saw that he had ripped off one of the roach's legs. The roach's attitude had not changed.

The tiny leg resting on his right finger resembled a woman's false eyelash. Cassady had never really seen a false eyelash; he just assumed that one would look like this.

He tossed the roach behind him, hardly heard it hit the floor. *Let it bleed to death.*

Four-thirty. Channel Seven gave the best account of the death of the woman. A voluptuous bleached blonde read from the teleprompter that

the woman's name had been Quita McLean—Quita after the heroine in the *Harlequin Romance* her mother had once read. She would have been twenty-three, and her sister said that she had always cried when the puppies were burned in the barn fire in *Lad: A Dog*. The television camera focused on a gray, withered old man who would not stop crying.

After a commercial break (in which time Cassady allowed more lines to erode his reflection, leaving clear, watery scars), the blonde came back to talk about a hostage situation in an embassy in Europe. One woman had been released by the terrorists—some fanatics wanting recognition for a dirtball country in the Middle East—because she had told him that she was pregnant. Suddenly Cassady remembered reading in the paper last week that a young woman who had been attacked on the West Side had told her assailant that she was pregnant so that she wouldn't be *you can't say it, can you?*

raped. The man didn't care. He did it anyway. Twice.

"Christ, give me a break," Cassady whispered through his teeth, or maybe he only thought he did. He walked into the kitchen, reaching for a full bottle of Jim Beam, thinking that if he was lucky he would get liver failure. He was certain he hadn't said *that* aloud.

Out of the corner of his eye, his hand still on the bottle, Cassady saw his friend, the roach, limping erratically toward the safety of an empty Jay's potato chip box. Taking a dirty fork from the sink, Cassady stepped forward, lunging the fork into the roach's mid-section. It sounded like a taco breaking in half. He kicked it out of the way.

By the time the Fast Money round came on *Family Feud*, Cassady was sprawled in his living-room chair like a discarded rag doll. A rusted spring stuck out of the top of the chair, coming closer with each of Cassady's deep breaths to piercing his shoulderblade. The empty bottle lay on the floor beside him.

He dreamt.

" . . . as the Beaver."

"Mommymommy, Denny was playing with my *Barbie dolls* again!" his sister three years his junior, was singing. Her voice sounded like the broken record it still was. They were sitting at the dinner table and his mother—no, it was Barbara Billingsley, Beaver's mom; no, it wasn't at all, this was getting confusing—turned her head sharply at the revelation. She was wearing a pink housecoat, and pearls dangled around her neck. The housecoat was missing several buttons. From his chair across from his mother, who now stared at him from behind her fortress of Teflon, Cassady thought that he could not remember June Cleaver ever wearing a housecoat on the show before . . .

His father peered over the edge of his paper in slits. "He took their clothes *all* off, Mommy!" the stupid bastard was saying, and why didn't she just shut the hell up?

"*Did not did not!*" Cassady became a broken record of his own, but his father was already standing, looming over his chair like an ogre, his belt coming rapidly off, making rough sounds as it passed through each loop of his pants. His beer belly fell forward, giving way to gravity now that the belt was not holding it back, and it sort of plopped into his potatoes. The belt made a flapping sound as it hit Cassady in the back

*right where the spring in the chair poked through*

"Faggot! Lousy faggot! Prissy Denny's playing with Corky the Retard!" The words were ritualistically chanted by several male voices; he couldn't see, scraping mud out of his eyes. He tasted dirt on his tongue. He blinked his eyes open, and no one was there except Sarah, and wasn't that strange because he hadn't met her until college, long after Jimmy Corcoran was beaten to death in an alley.

"Sarah!" his baby voice shrieked. "They hurt me, Sarah!" He felt embarrassed at the smallness of his voice.

"C'mere, you," she soothed, cradling his head,  
*fell away from the rusted spring*  
and he awoke in darkness.

*Kee-rist!* What a Grade-A bitch of a nightmare that was! He remembered parts of it, but not all, must like certain parts of songs that keep floating through your head

*long after the thrill of livin' is gone*

while you're walking down the street or waiting for a bus. Sarah, Corky, even a vague image of Mrs. Lavell making him recite the Lord's Prayer in French class. And the dolls. Shit . . .

???

He sniffed the air. Smelled like—no, he hadn't crapped himself. Smelled like grass. Wet grass, how the inside of a lawnmower bag smells after you've cut the grass when it was damp with dew or rain.

But it was more than that.

He smelled something decaying.

*the roach?*

It was dark out—how long had he been sleeping?—and Cassady reached over to turn the lamp on. The tallow light flickered beneath a lampshade that depicted a panoramic view of Niagara Falls, and he screamed.



Cassady's screams echoed through the thin walls and bare floors, but Audrey and Willis Fenton, who were watching *Magnum P.I.* next door, didn't hear anything.

Because the scream never made it to reality; it was a sob that welled up in his throat like so much phlegm. It was the sound that the woman had made just before the man had let the knife drop into her mouth.

And she was lying on his living-room couch.

She was naked. And she was dead. Her skin had become green and cheesy-looking, like that of a person who'd been receiving treatments for advanced cancer. Her eyes were open, sunken down into their sockets, mucus running over the sides like badly-prepared eggs, leaving dried yellow pus lining the rims of her eyelids. One eye stared lollingly at the ceiling, the other focused above and to the left of the television, which was sputtering in static. Her hair was white and alive with maggots. The skin was pulled back tightly around her lips, a death-grin of dried leather. Mud was caked on her gums and her cheeks. Blood splattered her teeth. Her hands clawed . . .

Cassady felt a sharp tingling in his crotch. At first, he thought he had urinated. A pain shot through his testicles. Sharp and quick, like when he sometimes rode his tenspeed when his shorts were too tight, and he pumped his legs too fast.

He looked down.

There was movement under his pants.

His testicles drew up. Cassady pulled the pants away from his waist.

A cockroach the size of a half-dollar was tangled in his pubic hairs like a fly in a spider's web. Its legs backpedaled madly; with each revolution the skin below Cassady's navel tugged outward in small, flesh-colored tents as the cockroach became more tightly entwined.

It looked up at Cassady, and the shadow of its antennae slashed a huge V across his bare chest.

Cassady screamed again. This time, it was real.

He awoke in a cold sweat. Shaking. It was evening; the lamp was off. A talk show was on the television, and Bryant Gumbel was asking Alexander Haig if he really was Deep Throat.

Dennis Cassady did not move from the chair for hours. He sat like someone in the later stages of senility, eyes glassy and vacant, lips quivering. Later, he would tell Sarah what had happened to him. He would tell her everything.

But that evening, he sat.  
He scratched the scab on his hand.  
He let it bleed.



## The Weight of Zero

John Alfred Taylor

*Born in Springfield, Missouri on September 12, 1931, John Alfred Taylor earned a B.A. from the University of Missouri and an M.A. and a Ph.D. from the University of Iowa. He currently teaches English at Washington and Jefferson College in Washington, Pennsylvania. While he has published some 300 poems in various little magazines over the years, Taylor's output of short fiction has been relatively small, with appearances in Twilight Zone Magazine, Weirdbook, Galaxy, Galileo, and elsewhere. Despite this dearth of publication, Taylor has had stories selected for both The Year's Best Fantasy Stories and The Year's Best Horror Stories.*

*"The Weight of Zero" is the beginning of a novel in progress. Twilight Zone Magazine called it "an erudite and ambitious foray into the nihilism and decadence of the '90s." Taylor confides: "The germ of the story was reading about the cult of Ravachol and about Marie de St. Remy: the names of the Universellist publications and the quotations are authentic. So is the song about dancing to the sound of dynamite."*

*Finish the book, John.*

THE TOADLIKE CONCIERGE pointed upward and held out four fingers when Constantine asked for M. Richards. The stairs were steep and narrow, reeking of garlic and fish and urine, nearly dark after the fierce sun. Knocking on the peeling green paint of the door, he waited more than a minute without hearing a sound, wondering if the concierge's grin had been pleasure at seeing an Englishman climbing on a fool's errand. It *might* have been his accent; people had been smirking ever since his arrival in Toulon. But his accent was Parisian, not Provençal-provincial like theirs . . .

Nothing stirred within, so he raised the brass head of his cane and rapped on the door again. Loud in the constricted space, but through the last echoes he detected a soft shuffling on the other side. The lock clicked and the door opened a bare few inches.

"Tony?"

"Beg pardon, Constantine. Couldn't tell it was you." His half-brother stepped back, swung the door wide so he could enter. There was more visibility beyond, thanks to a dirty skylight, and at first glance Constantine thought Anthony had changed little in the last four years.

He *was* thinner; because Anthony was in shirtsleeves and wore no tie, Constantine could see the cords of his neck around the gap between the collarbones. But his face seemed as youthful as ever till he turned sideways to the light and showed the fretted wrinkles round his eyes. "You haven't changed a bit."

Anthony's smile flickered like lightning. "Exile becomes me."

He led the way inside, gestured toward a chair. "Welcome to my humble attic." Lowering himself gingerly onto the broken seat, Constantine peered about. There was a desk of sorts, a narrow bed, a table with basin and pitcher all furred with dust in the bleak light. Lurid chromos and etchings ripped from journals decorated the wall.

Anthony gestured a bit too broadly. "After all these years my brother seeks me out. Before we fall on each other's bosom, a libation is demanded." He leaned over the table. "Unfortunately I have no brandy, but there is absinthe—"

"Too early in the day for me." Constantine arched his hands over the head of his cane and watched as his half-brother added water to the sickly stuff.

Anthony sat down on the bed. "Cheers," he said, watching Constantine unblinkingly over the rim of the glass while he sipped the clouded liquid. "Again welcome, but there must be some special reason for this visit in person—"

Constantine almost wished he'd accepted a glass of absinthe. Best go straight to the point. "You know the girl is dead?"

"I heard—in the asylum."

"She never regained her right mind," Constantine announced solemnly.

Anthony smirked. "Naturally."

"I must say you take it rather lightly."

Anthony lowered his glass. "I knew beforehand. She wanted to see some actual magic. *Quid pro quo*."

"You mean she had to pay with her sanity?"

"No, dear brother—I had to pay with her sanity—that was the price my—instructors—asked."

Constantine tried to keep his voice under control. "Was it worth it?"

"Yes."

"Monstrous!"

"You don't understand, Constantine, and I couldn't explain. There is knowledge worth any price, *jenseits von Gut and Böse*, as Herr Nietzsche would say."

"I don't speak German."

"'Beyond good and evil.' But perhaps your Mr. Kipling says it better for you. 'Down to Gehenna, or up to the Throne,/He travels the fastest who travels alone.'"

"I know which way you're going."

"Not exactly filial. And inexact; there are thrones and thrones."

"And principalities and powers," added Constantine.

"Sound doctrine, Constantine, sound. But to the point—What brings you here? I suppose you were sent to tell me I can come home now it's safe—"

Constantine squeezed the head of his walking stick till it hurt. "Just the opposite."

"Oh dear. Might I ask why?"

"Anne is engaged to be married. A very good match. If you came back the scandal would be raked up again—"

"And poof—the very good match is blown out, eh? I understand, I commiserate. And promise not to come back. At a price."

"What price?"

"Twenty-five pounds more per month."

"Twenty-five more! What do you do with what the bankers send you now? You could live so much better than this."

"I have rather special expenses."

"Drink? Women?"

"Nothing so quotidian. Twenty-five."

Constantine sighed. "All right. I think I can persuade them."

"If you can't, Anne can." Draining his glass, he stood up to pour himself another drink. "Changed your mind?"

"Just a little, perhaps; I've never tasted it."

"All right," said Anthony, "and for you, a clean glass." He pulled out a surprisingly fresh handkerchief to polish the tumbler. "Just a little," he said as he poured, "and lots of water. The water may be the real risk—it takes years for the wormwood to affect the brain."

Constantine took the offered glass, sipped gingerly. The blend of bitter wormwood and sweet anise was strange, and he couldn't help making a face.

"It grows on one," laughed Anthony. "And how are things with the family?"

"Everyone's well."

"Has Father a woman?"

Embarrassingly for a man of the world, Constantine found himself blushing. "Of course not—he's never gotten over your mother's death."

"He's no eunuch."

"No, but—" Desperately, Constantine looked about, wondering how to change the subject. One of the chromos caught his eye. "My Lord!"

"What is it?"

Constantine pointed. "It's Saint Denis carrying his head. You're not leaning toward Rome, are you?"

"Certainly not." Then Anthony followed the direction of his finger and laughed. "Oh no. In spite of the halo. That's Ravachol."

"Who?"

"An anarchist executed some years ago."

"Now you're an anarchist?"

"Not in any earthly sense. But that next picture's Ravachol, too—this time surmounting the guillotine."

"Seems a bit blasphemous, so like Christ resurrected."

"Positively. But I *know* Ravachol is resurrected. More than I can say for the other."

"Tony!"

His half-brother smiled. "The universe is larger than you think, and has possibilities unmentioned in *The Book of Common Prayer*."

"A guillotined criminal resurrected?"

"As with beauty, criminality is in the eye of the beholder. And he's resurrected only by becoming part of something enormously larger—"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I could show you, though you still wouldn't understand."

Constantine drummed irritably on the floor with his walking stick. "Nonsense is difficult to understand."

His half-brother smiled "Not nonsense."

"What else do you call it?"

Anthony reached into the open collar of his shirt, pulled out a gray metal plaque on a cord. "I call it nothing; it has no name in any mortal language."

Constantine blinked; there was a crucifix cast into the plaque. Perhaps Tony was lying about not being attracted to the Roman faith? His half-brother smiled, stroking the plaque lovingly with his forefinger. For a moment his smile froze, and it was as if there was no presence there, as if the teeth and muscles of the face were being operated by something as far away as Saturn, as if the eyes were glass. Then Anthony dropped

the pendant back inside his shirt, and was himself again. "And where are you staying?"

"At the hotel by the Gare."

"Always the railway hotel, oh constant Constantine?"

"It's convenient."

"No doubt. But don't eat there."

"Are they unsanitary?"

"Not at all. But the cooking is almost British in its dreadfulness."

"So what do you recommend?"

"There's a restaurant a few blocks from here—inexpensive, but very good. Of course, I'd rather you paid for both of us."

"All right."

"But let me show you the sights of Toulon first."

The heat of the day had gone, and Anthony showed Constantine Puget's caryatids at the Hôtel la Ville, the monumental gate of Vauban's arsenal, the Grande Rade and Petite Rade with their ranks of masts, the Quai Sebastapol, before giving the cabby directions to L'Arbre Vert. "Not that there's a tree near, green or otherwise. But the food is good, and the wine's cheap."

The sun was still above the horizon when they arrived, but the gaslights were already burning, pallid blue whispers against the white-washed walls. At least there were tablecloths and respectable families solemn at the rite of chewing and swallowing.

"I recommend the house wine. Nothing extraordinary, you understand," Anthony said when the waiter came. Constantine settled on bouillabaise and poached sole, and his half-brother ordered consommé and fresh asparagus. "I eat less than formerly," he explained. "It increases my ability to concentrate—a sharp focus is as necessary to the mind as a burning glass."

"Necessary for what?"

Anthony answered with an almost imperceptible smile. "That would be telling."

"Charades are amusing at Christmas, Tony, not now. You aren't involved in something political?"

"Certainly not. Just because I have pictures of Ravachol on my wall doesn't mean I spend my nights making bombs or plotting with bearded sons of toil."

Constantine laughed. "Just for an instant I did wonder. But you're right, it does sound absurd. Though I've never understood why you left Paris to come here."



“Ravachol had something to do with it,” his half-brother said. “In a manner of speaking, that is.”

That moment a girl of fifteen or sixteen arrived with their soup. Her hair was long and black, heavy as a helmet, her eyes accented in an Eastern way. She brushed against Anthony as she served his consommé, and her sullen face lit up with a smile. “My occasional mistress when I feel the need,” he explained after she was gone. “Half-Arab. Almost as good as a boy.”

Constantine blushed. “Don’t talk rot.”

“I was only making an observation from experience, dear brother. You’re on the other side of the Channel now, so you don’t have to maunder about the Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name. The sort of phrase that poor silly Oscar *would* coin. I read he’s in France too, now that he’s out of gaol.”

“Yes.”

“Come, come, Constantine. Enjoy your bouillabaise—I won’t discuss boys or girls any more.”

“You were saying Ravachol had something to do with your coming to Toulon.”

“Was I?” He spooned up another mouthful of consommé, savored it. “Oh well, explaining that won’t do any harm. I came down here to meet a lady who talked to Ravachol after he was guillotined.”

“After?”

“Repeatedly.”

“A spirit medium?”

“You might call her that. Though perhaps prophetess would be a better description. That’s what her followers called her.” He fell silent to pour himself another glass of wine.

Constantine put his spoon down with an audible clank. “Just who is this prophetess, and who are her followers?”

“Was, dear brother, was. The late Marie de Saint-Rémy, vates of the local Universellist sect.”

“And are you one of these Universellists?”

Anthony looked at him, shaking his head in admiration. “Constant Constantine. If not the Church of Rome, then the Universellists . . . No. They bore me, though their prophetess was of great interest.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Let’s say that she was under the influence of a higher power. Like Ravachol, Vaillant, Henry.” Tony began to sing to himself in French, just loud enough for Constantine to hear the words:

“In the past our forefathers  
Danced to the sound of cannon.  
Now the tragic dance  
Needs a louder music:  
Let us dynamite, let us dynamite!”

Outside, the rooftops swam in violet light. Anthony suggested it was too fine an evening not to walk, that his room was just far enough to allow a breath of air.

Ahead a pair of sailors haggled with a woman under a streetlamp. Anthony laughed to see Constantine look away in disgust. “If you feel this way in Toulon, how can you go anywhere in London?”

“One knows where to go.”

“Your club perhaps. Otherwise they’re ubiquitous. Ask the French; *they* come to London and they are shocked at our regiments of soiled doves. And there’s a new recruit every minute—the Ripper was fighting the tide—a quire of whores made for every one he killed.”

“Tony!”

“But Jack knew what he was doing—”

Constantine stopped dead and glared at his brother. “I’d rather you didn’t indulge your morbid taste in humor just now.”

Anthony bent his head apologetically. “No humor intended. Just that the Ripper was serious—”

“Most madmen are.”

“Not mad, Constantine. Only doing what was demanded. Like the judge who sentenced the Haymarket Martyrs, like whoever actually threw the bomb in Chicago . . . But Jack was the one who gave the clue.”

“Clue?”

“That there was something preternatural involved—”

“There’s nothing preternatural about butchering prostitutes.”

“Not so much *that*, though some of the mutilations and dissections were unusual. No, what I’m talking about is his invisibility.”

Constantine shook his head bemusedly. “You should write for the shilling-shockers.”

“You haven’t studied the reports,” Anthony whispered. “Blood was still pouring from Long Liz Stride’s throat when the carter found her in the yard, and he’d come in by the only gate. And Catherine Eddowes was dead as well within the hour. Then think how often he struck in areas where the police were hunting him in force—”

“So he said the magic word and disappeared?”

“Nothing so puerile. But nobody knows his name after a decade, and he may not know he was the Ripper.”

Constantine grunted irritably. “You always had a taste for paradox.”

“Not a paradox, dear brother.” Anthony stepped around a melon rind on the pavement before continuing. “Jack was a tool. Or a toy. Like his victims. Like the judge in Chicago. Like Ravachol and his executioner. All of them tools or toys.”

“At least your speculations are entertaining, Tony. But a tool or toy demands a user—”

“Exactly. A user. I had communicated with it before—or maybe *them*. There’s really no way of knowing whether it’s plural or singular—”

“Our name is legion, eh?”

Anthony slowed his gait and glanced sideways at him. “You mustn’t translate everything into familiar terms. What I was in communication with—or communion, perhaps; difficult to find the right word when the contact was so glancing and oblique—was nothing you’d call God or Devil, though it has powers like one or the other, and in its detachment—”

Constantine stared back. “You seem to have settled for the singular.”

“Only for convenience.” Anthony picked up his stride. “And its detachment is demonic or divine—who can say? But detachment transcendental, absolute as its power. That may be the real terror—it or they don’t understand us any more than we can understand them or it. But it can manipulate us.”

“I am not convinced.” Constantine looked up at the narrow strip of night between the façades. “There’s nothing there in the dark except more nothing. Zero had no singular or plural.”

Anthony’s laugh was dry as a cicada’s cry. “Not unless zero comes in its full weight.”

When Tony unlocked his door and struck a match for the gas fixture, the tiny flame made the room distorted and enlarged, as if it were only the antechamber to the huger darkness pressing on the skylight. But with the gas mantle lit and adjusted, the room’s drab normality returned.

“Sit down,” Anthony said, and went to the table with the glasses. “Want one?” he asked, pouring himself an absinthe.

“Not for me,” Constantine said. “I can’t stay; I’m taking the early train tomorrow.”

“Too bad. Then I’d best convince you quickly.” He sat down, his eyes glittering in the gaslight. “After leaving England so precipitously, the power which had instructed me withdrew from all communication. I was

only one step up the ladder, so to speak. Paris seemed the only place to go; it was a center of occultists, some with genuine abilities, perhaps. I read Eliphaz Levi, I involved myself with Sâr Péladon and his Rose-Croix, I attended Black Masses, and found no clue to the next step. But with the capture and trial of Ravachol, Vaillant's bombing of the Chamber of Deputies, the explosion in the Cafe Terminus, I recognized my instructor again. It had demanded sacrifice of me, now it was taking it through its priests of dynamite, and countersacrifice through its priests of the guillotine."

"Don't be ridiculous, Tony."

"No, it uses men as toys. And it likes to break its toys—or rather, have them break each other. This was only a suspicion, only an intuition, until I heard of Marie de Saint-Rémy, and came here. The first time I spoke to her, I knew, and with my help she learned more, and soon I was back in communication with the power. She was a bit mad, of course—sensitives often are. What comes in from outside is so out of scale, so foreign."

"Then what makes you so sure this isn't all madness?"

"Let me read you some of the things she said." Anthony raised himself, walked over to a corner. There were magazines stacked on the floor, and he searched through them quickly, to return with five or six. "These are Universellist journals, *Le Christ anarchiste*, *L'Antéchrist*, *Le Journal d'outré-tombe*, *Le Jugement dernier*."

Constantine snorted. "Impressive names, if one has a taste for melodrama."

Anthony opened the first one. "I marked the passages of special interest so I could study them . . . ah, here we are." He read in a slightly unnatural voice. "The authors of anarchist attacks are the harbingers of the movements of *final destruction* . . . These beings do not have names in any human language, and *the title of God is too feeble to apply to them* . . . They are the most divine and elevated powers that have existed up to the present. To make it clear, we can say that they are the *Soul* of souls, the Just."

"This is supposed to convince me? She's talking about Ravachol, Vaillant, Henry, not your unknown powers. High-flown, perhaps, but then you said she was a trifle mad."

"What about this?" said Anthony, leafing through another journal. "She says she 'will find the secret that will clear the earth of the *unclean* to make way for the *pure*.' She goes on to say she used her occult abilities to inspire bombings, and distributed magical forces among her disciples." He picked up a third issue: "Hecatombs without precedent are needed to break the driving force of this society, fortified by the entire accumu-

lation of its crimes throughout the ages . . . great cataclysms which we have called down!" He put the journal down. "Well?"

"Fortissimo doesn't make the tune any more worth listening to, Tony. I'll believe in your outside power when I'm introduced to it. Or is it a *them*?"

Anthony flushed slightly. "It could be either." He gestured helplessly to the journals at his feet. "You want more than this?"

"Precisely."

"You realize it's impossible to introduce you to the power in the usual fashion. It's impossible even to see it. But you'll know it's here, though I want to warn you that the very presence of the intelligence is dangerous to the unprepared mind."

Constantine chuckled. "Fi fo fi fum, et cetera."

"I'm deadly serious, Constantine, not a stage magician building up his tricks with patter."

"You sound quite similar."

"All right, but on your own head be it." Anthony went over to the table, poured himself a finger of absinthe, drank it down neat. He was pale and sweating when he sat down again, though Constantine suspected it was more alcohol than terror.

"Aren't you going to turn the light down, Tony? It seems prerequisite to a *séance*."

Anthony smiling wincingly. "You've heard of the noon-day devil? This presence is like that. Midnight or afternoon in the Sahara are the same to it." He reached into his open collar, pulled out the plaque with the crucifix.

"Going to command the demon by the power of the cross?"

"Not exactly. A bit of protective coloring." He turned the plaque around on its cord. The back was covered with a patternless swirl of fine lines, parallel, zigzag, concentric, but even at this distance in the gaslight, Constantine began to see a pattern starting to emerge, a pattern that hinted at a meaning so strange and unendurable he was able to throw up his hand and twist aside before he saw too much.

He could feel himself shuddering as Tony exulted: "Now you begin to believe. These are Marie de Saint-Rémy's invention—or rather, what she was commanded to have made. Only two were cast. And the artisan who made them for us went out one night and drowned himself in the harbor. The power uses any means to hide itself from the uninitiated."

Constantine ventured a glance between his fingers. His half-brother was stroking the plaque again, eyes staring. His face went dead, mean-

ingless, as empty of personality as the frayed mask of an anatomical diagram.

Then the presence was there. Anthony dwindled and twisted. Gravity seemed to tilt, though he was still in his chair with the walls behind him, and everything remained vertical. It was as if the center of the Earth was no longer the reference point, as if the presence made its own rules. For the first time in his life Constantine realized how rapidly the Earth was wheeling through space, felt the giddiness of its multiple motions rather than accepted them intellectually. Only the great being in the room with them was still, somehow impinging on this small rushing locus.

Tony had been right about his knowing the intelligence was there even when he couldn't see it. The way Constantine shrank instinctively from its foreignness, the automatic horripilation of the back of his neck, and the breathless, metallic taste in his mouth were testimonies. Worse was the sense that what was there was cold, so cold as not to be living in the usual terms, so intelligent it went beyond or beneath what intelligence usually meant.

If it stayed much longer he would die spiritually, blasted and crushed by the mere proximity of something so massively inhuman.

Tony's mouth opened as if it were being worked by levers, breathed in like a pump. The voice that emerged was strange in timbre, the rhythms of the words misplaced. "You have been told more than you understand—" It stopped, and breathed mechanically, waiting. "More than you should know. But your co-organism—the other branching—is the one who should be pruned. You know nothing—" The mouth pumped again. "Important. No co-organisms more distant—none who matter—will believe."

Tony's face writhed in what might have been meant as a smile. "Say goodbye to your near-branch. For now. You will join him ten years and eleven months toward us. Be part of us forever."

Constantine gasped as the weight of its presence vanished like a blown-out candleflame. His half-brother leaned bonelessly out of the chair, striking the floor with a sound that would haunt Constantine to the end.

Turned face up, Tony looked like he had been dead for hours, but when Constantine rushed down he asked the concierge to *faire venir le médecin* before his brother died. Let the physician explain—if he could.

Then Constantine climbed back up to take the plaque off his brother's neck and hide it. With so many arrangements to make, he wouldn't be taking the morning train. Except for Anthony and other objects, the room was empty. Nothing but darkness stared in through the skylight.



## John's Return to Liverpool

Christopher Burns

*"John's Return to Liverpool" is one of two extraordinary stories Christopher Burns published during 1985 in England's avant-garde fantasy magazine, Interzone. The other, a post-nuclear disaster mood piece, "Fogged Plates," seems appropriate from one who lives about a dozen miles from the Sellafield nuclear plant.*

*Born in 1944, Burns makes his home in Cumbria, on the coast of the English Lake District. Burns considers his writing to more mainstream than in the science fiction or fantasy genres, and most of his stories in recent years have appeared in such places as the London Review of Books, London Magazine, and the New Stories anthologies from Hutchinson. His first novel, Snakewrist, "about an English book cataloguer who gradually becomes drawn into the world of a vanished adventurer," was published by Jonathan Cape in London this past May.*

HE CAME TO the door during the first frost of winter. Straight away she know who he was.

"You've come back," she said.

In the streetlight he looked bloodless. Behind him frost began to settle on the grass and blind the windows of parked cars. Children in heavy boots careered between the houses, turned corners sharply, yelled to each other through the drifting cold.

His hair was damp and his nose was thinner than it should have been. She thought of how she'd read that sniffing cocaine destroys the bridges, then felt guilty that such a small thing should have crossed her mind. It was nothing compared to the magnitude of his return.

His skin was waxen, as if it had been newly laid across the bones. "Can I come in?" he asked simply.

She didn't feel she had to say anything.

He sat down beside the coal fire but kept on his thick blue coat. Its shoulders sparkled with frost. His glasses misted up with the temperature



change and he unhooked them from his ears, cleaning them absentmindedly with a handkerchief. They were the familiar round frames. She noticed his hands were thinner and bonier than she remembered or expected.

"You've lost a lot of weight," she said quietly.

He nodded.

Dorothy got down on her knees in front of him and looked straight into his eyes. Without the glasses they seemed shortsighted and introspective. "The pounds have dropped off you," she said, "you can tell it just by looking at you. Your face is a lot thinner than it was. You were quite beefy when I knew you. There are lines under your eyes and your nose is so thin it looks like a blade."

"I was too fat a lot of the time in the early days." Despite all the years his voice was still flat and nasal.

"That may be, but now you're much too thin. I used to think that, you know. All that macrobiotic food isn't for you."

He smiled.

"John, you need a good feed."

He shook his head. "No. No food. I can't. But I still need sleep."

"Are you tired now?"

"I get tired very quickly. It's as if everything has drained away. All those energy levels just aren't there anymore."

"They'll come back," she said comfortingly. The firelight danced in his eyes. "You can have the spare bed. But first you must have a hot bath. The fire's been on all day so there's plenty of hot water. Don't argue, you need to get the cold out of your bones. It's been a long time, John."

"More than twenty years."

"I'm pleased you remembered me. Honored."

"I was never any good at keeping in touch. You know that."

"A lot happened. I got married." He looked suddenly uncertain, and she laughed. "Don't worry, it finished long ago. All I have left of him are a few photographs, some of his clothes and an old wedding certificate." Suddenly she felt tears at the corners of her eyes. They were so sharp they stung her and she shook her head in disbelief. "I still can't believe it's you."

"Oh, it's me all right. No doubt about it. Flesh and blood." He extended his hands and she grasped them, feeling the skin and the bones. She moved her fingers round until she could feel the slow pulse in his wrists.

She couldn't hold back the tears. They slid down her face. "You knew that if you ever wanted me I'd be here."

He nodded slowly, as if preoccupied.

She sniffed (she thought it sounded horrible) and said firmly "Bath."  
"All right. Whatever you say. If I can stay . . ."

"Of course you're staying. For as long as you want. Now come on. You look as if you haven't been warm for days and your hair's in bad need of a wash."

For that moment his eyes looked uncomprehending.

"I'm not giving you a choice, John."

"Okay."

She ran the bath until the room was full of steam and dappled glass. He stood and let her undress him, making no protest, as silent as a patient. In the bath his feet stuck out of the water and she placed them on either side of the chrome taps. She washed his hair several times, relathering it, feeling it become cleaner beneath her fingers. She left him soaking while she washed his clothes. They had expensive labels but felt as if he'd been sleeping rough in them. She left the bathroom door open in case, in a trance with the heat, he slipped beneath the water.

When she dried him he felt warmer, healthier, more human. The water that dripped from his hair was warm. He even began to smile. He stood there, still pale but a little more pink, while she rubbed him dry with a thick white towel. She felt the rib, the muscle wall, the relaxed skin of his genitals, the slow thump of the heart. It was then that she asked him about the marks. They were distinct pinkish circles, almost like immature nipples.

"What are these?" she asked, trying not to sound as nervous as she felt.

He looked down.

"You must know," he said.

"Are they where the bullets hit?"

He nodded.

She tried to be calm, as calm as she could. "John," she asked, "are you dead?"

He laughed. He pushed his hair back with one hand. "Of course I'm dead," he said, "can't you tell? Don't you believe what you read in the papers?"

Later John sat in her husband's dressing gown in front of the fire. He stared into its flames, watching the black coal burning. He seemed content.

When he slept his hair fell across his eyes in a fine swath, making him look almost boyish. She pushed it gently back from his eyelids with her fingertips. He drew the blankets tightly about him like a child.

That night while he slept Dorothy filled his room with mementos of his life—posters, records, fan magazines, old photographs, a couple of books, a guitar with his name scrawled across it. Then she lay in bed, with a warm tide of fulfillment and trust flowing through her. She stayed awake like a guardian, and thought of him waking like a child at Christmas, lost in wonder at the Aladdin's cave of his own past.

He was already awake when she looked in. He sat by the bed in her husband's broadly striped pajamas. He picked through the collection, never dwelling for long on anything, but sometimes smiling and sometimes looking puzzled at this accumulation of evidence. Later she brought out the photograph album and together they looked at the pictures.

"You must have been our first fan," John said.

"I never claimed that."

"Didn't you? But you were always there. I remember we all liked to see you. You gave us a sense of security."

"I remember I felt quite possessive about you. When you started to make it big I thought you were being stolen by others. Firstly girls from Liverpool, then Hamburg, London—"

"Tomorrow the world," he said, and the cutting edge was in his voice. "Where was this taken?"

"Didn't you recognize Matthew Street?"

"Christ. Yes."

"Do you know everyone on it?"

"That's me. And you, and that girl who used to sometimes come with you. With Pete Best, George. That's Ringo when he was with Rory Storm. That's Rory's girlfriend. This must have been just after Stu died."

"Not long. We were all terribly upset about that."

He put his hand up to his face and spread his fingers in an unexpectedly feminine motion.

"We wanted Paul on the photo but it all got a bit chaotic," she laughed. "He came back to line up the camera with me and I took this by mistake. I just pressed the shutter too soon. And it was the end of the film."

He tilted his head back and laughed. She could see hollows at the base of his neck. "Look," he said, "I can remember a lot about those days. All of a sudden."

They reminisced about the old days. About old songs, places, friends. Endless loves that had lasted a few days, wild ambitions that were never airborne; a time when all the future had lain before them. John was

relaxed and amusing, telling tall stories, most of them true, with all his old flair of pithiness and zest.

"Come on," she said finally, "it's time you ate." He shook his head.

"It must be twelve hours since you arrived," she said, "and you haven't eaten or drunk a thing. You must *try*."

"No," he said, "leave it."

She left it a moment and then said, "It'll do you good to have a meal."

"Don't let me stop you," he said.

So she ate on her own.

Later she dressed him in a pair of jeans and a black sweater. They were both slightly too big for him. "His shoes will be a size too large, as well," she mused. "Maybe we could find some really thick socks so they won't be too uncomfortable."

"You know I'll have to revisit the old places."

She nodded. "I knew they could never kill you," she said. "I knew you'd come back."

He thought about this for a long time. "I always knew it was possible," he said at last. "We thought about it a lot."

"What happened? What *really* happened?"

"He got me all right. You go through life tensed up for the unexpected, and when it happens . . ."

He gripped her arm. She felt her limb go numb the grip was so tight.

"You mustn't tell anyone," he said. There was urgency and a slight bitterness in his voice.

She shook her head, mute.

"I mean it," he said, and all the old menace and unpredictability were there. "No one must ever know."

"I swear it."

"No one."

"My arm hurts."

He let go of her. "Sorry," he said.

Within a few days he was leaving her for several hours, slipping out of the house at dusk with a turned-up coat collar and a pulled-down hat. Sometimes when he returned he would tell her where he had been—to where his mother lived, or Aunt Mimi's old house, or Penny Lane, or Matthew Street, or Strawberry Fields. Sometimes he said nothing, but stared into the fire, red light edging his face. She would pretend to watch the television but all the time keep her eyes on him. He still had not eaten, and she was becoming increasingly concerned. She once suggested calling a doctor and he was mercilessly sarcastic to her, asking did she

not know that a doctor could do nothing for the dead—only angels and undertakers were of any use to the dead.

So she had rich, hot, heavy-smelling meals prepared for herself, hoping that they would somehow trigger hunger in him. But he remained indifferent, and all the time got thinner.

And although at times he was his old charming self, he often drifted away into silence and introspection, gazing for long periods at nothing. In this relaxed, almost exhausted posture he looked like a man recuperating, lost between ordeals, resting between battles. It was then that he became a stranger, a foreigner in his own land, unwilling or unable to grasp the everyday event. He had no trouble in refusing to answer her.

Over the next few days he offered her four versions of the afterlife. She only asked him about it once but he could not let the matter rest. When he described them there was an edge to his voice. He was like a man betrayed, cheated out of his inheritance.

In the first of these he told her of an afterlife like a children's heaven. There he would meet again all those he had loved, including the famous Julia, his mother. "She's there all right," he said, eyes glittering, "it's just the way you think it should be. All your friends, all your relations. It's like one big, endless, happy childhood. Like soft, neverending protection. The lion lies down with the lamb."

The second was a rock'n'roll heaven. "They're all up there," he said, moving his hand in a slow arc and looking up at the ceiling. He was like a parody preacher. "Presley, Hendrix, Holly. They make music too great for mortal ears. And the girls are always beautiful and always available." He stared directly at her, daring her to take him seriously.

A third version, the Eastern version, spoke of cycles of incarnation, of moments of insight between death and birth during which one saw with a clarity that Earth could never match. Life was an ascent or descent through stages of self-knowledge. One plunged down the spiral toward the senseless and inanimate or crawled up it toward the angels.

"And you?" Dorothy asked.

He sneered. "Why," he said, "I've always known where I was going. To the toppermost of the poppermost." It was the half-dismissive, half-serious phrase he'd used to cajole and encourage the others when they'd been struggling in Hamburg and Liverpool.

But John also offered the possibility of a fourth kind of afterlife. This was a spiritual existence, the survival of the mind without the body in a nexus of consciousness. Identities were individual and yet inseparable from the connections which passed through them. They were pulses in the eternal mind.

"And you've been part of this?"

Suddenly, without warning, he looked stricken and fearful. "I don't know," he whispered. She put her arms round him and he buried his head in her bosom. After a few minutes he had recovered.

Of course, she speculated about a fifth version. The dead returned to their old homes, haunting them, were restless and unsatisfied spirits until something finally laid them to rest. But he always felt so real in her arms.

"Come on," she said to him, "you're all right, John. You're here with me. You're *safe*."

"Do you think so?"

"Of course, I know so."

"None of it's true, Dorothy."

"What? What isn't?"

His eyes were startling and honest, his cheeks thin. His hands looked large on the end of sticklike arms. "It's oblivion, you know," he said, matter-of-fact, "everything just sputters to an end, the body systems close down, consciousness just folds in on itself. There's no light, no dark, nothing. It's oblivion. Nothing. Forever."

"A dying man's life comes to him in a few moments before the end," he said bitterly. "And that's it. You go into death fooling yourself. Our only talent is self-deception."

That night Dorothy sat and watched television. John was already asleep; his periods of rest were getting longer and longer. Now it was common for him to sleep the clock round. Sometimes when the winter sun set she would ask him if he was going out; he'd shake his head and say he was tired.

She sat with a coffee and watched a soap opera, the news, and a documentary about medicine. In the documentary a doctor discussed the nature of the self. One's feelings were located in the self, he said, and that was paradoxical, for the self was unlocatable. Nobody knew where it was. As an illustration he showed amputees who still experienced sensations in limbs that were no longer there. When something vital is removed, the doctor said, the self creates an alternative—and it is too simple to say that this creation is fictitious. To the self, it is real.

"You've hardly changed at all," he said to her the next day.

"Haven't I?" She was flattered but surprised.

"You're just like you were all those years ago." He seemed bemused by this.

She laughed. "It's nice of you to say so, but it's not really true."

"It is. You even have the same figure. Girlish—that's the word. People change over the years. Look at me. But you, you're no different. You look

twenty-five years younger than me. Why, you even wear the same kind of clothes as you did then.”

“I *don't*.”

He nodded. It was slow. “You’d think you were still there, Dorothy. All around me it still belongs to the early sixties. There’s only me that’s different.”

He shuddered. It was a spasm that ran through him, and he hugged his arms to himself to control it.

“I’m outside the time capsule,” he said.

Dorothy stood up and looked at herself in the mirror. Afternoon light made her face white. She bent close to the glass. There were broadening strands of gray in her hair, webbing of lines at her eyes and mouth, and she knew if she pulled down the collar of her blouse she would find the beginnings of a scrawniness at the base of her neck.

John’s fingers traced his chest until they found, beneath his clothes, the site of one of the bullets. He spread his hands over the area, pushed the flesh together. He was like a young girl discovering the beginnings of a breast.

“Dorothy.”

“Yes?”

“I’m dying. I know it.”

“You’re not, you’re *not*.”

“I know it. I’ve been thinking stupid things, thinking that I’d survived it. I thought that somehow this was all true, that it was real, that I’d been given some kind of guarantee.” He tilted his head downward. His hair fell forward. When he spoke again his voice was strained and unstable. “Because I can reach out and touch things, because I can touch you, I thought that was proof.” He put his hands up to his face.

“John?”

When he looked up again the lower rims of his glasses had caught tears. They spilled out of the sides as he lifted his head. His voice shook. “It scares me,” he said, “I’m terrified.”

Once more she had to comfort him. She could feel his bones beneath the skin. There was so little flesh on him now she felt as if she were comforting a hunger victim.

“I’m tired,” he whispered.

Even though it was only mid-afternoon she decided to put him to bed. He looked drained and ill, and she had to steady him as he walked to the bedroom. She helped him undress. He insisted that he did not have the

strength to get into any pajamas so she humored him and let him get into bed naked.

He lay and cried while she sat beside him and held his hand and dried his eyes. Eventually the grief seemed to exhaust him, and he quietened and then slipped into unconsciousness. She sat with him for a while. He still sniffed and trembled a little in his sleep, but gradually, as he slept more deeply, the distress left him.

Dorothy went back to the mirror, took off her clothes and stood in front of it. She studied herself for several minutes. The light was cruel to her. There was no mistaking her age.

As she watched herself a feeling of unreality swept through her, loosening her understanding, releasing her grip. She felt floating, unresolved, half-imagined. It was a sickeningly dreamlike sensation, as if she belonged to something or someone else.

Weakened, she went back into the bedroom.

John lay beneath the sheets. He was quiet, still; his head was tilted back and his arms were down by his sides. His eyes were closed.

She lifted the sheets and slipped into bed beside him. He was cold. She wrapped herself around him, hoping that the heat of her body would warm him. He hardly moved. She could feel the slow pulse of his heart, the shallow peace of his light breathing.

Her fingers searched him until they touched the small round mark of a bullet. She ran her fingertips around it, touching it lightly, gently. After a while, like a newborn animal returning to its mother's teat, found the wound with her mouth, and fastened her lips around it.

She lay there quietly, waiting for the night.





## In Late December, Before the Storm

Paul M. Sammon

*Born December 22, 1949 in Philadelphia, Paul M. Sammon has been a world traveler since childhood. Sammon saw much of the Far East—and not the side reserved for tourists—with his father, who worked in military intelligence. Later, Sammon's work as a journalist/filmmaker/publicist sent him on excursions throughout the world. Just now he resides in Los Angeles, where he has formed his own small film/video production company, Awesome Productions.*

*Readers who have attended major science fiction conventions may remember Paul M. Sammon for his slide show presentations as studio publicist for such films as Conan the Barbarian, Conan the Destroyer, and Dune. Most recently Sammon has written, produced and directed the science fiction comedy, P.P.—The Planetary Pal. While Sammon has published over 150 articles, interviews, and critical studies in such places as Cinefantastique, Cinefex, American Cinematographer, Omni, and the Los Angeles Times, this is his first published piece of fiction. "In Late December, Before the Storm," according to Sammon, is based on a dream and is about an old girlfriend. He calls the story "a parable of conscience."*

YESTERDAY MORNING the nervousness started. It always starts that way. With nerves. I lay staring upward on the sweat-soaked sheets for nearly half an hour, not fully awake, not wanting to go back to sleep. Not thinking, either. Just feeling. Feeling the sour edge pulsing in my throat, feeling my tingling fingers, feeling a tiny blade of fear nicking at my gut with every indrawn breath. The dirty gray ceiling above the mattress blotted out my thoughts like the end of all hope.

I bit a fingernail. Slowly one word bubbled up into consciousness.

Today.

That's when I rolled out of bed. I dressed, went to the kitchen, and broke a few eggs in a pan. After I'd eaten, I had my first cigarette. It tasted terrible.

Then I remembered the calendars.

It's funny about calendars; I used to like them. At one time the two of us enjoyed jotting down comical little notes on those oversize monsters you can find in office supply stores. We enjoyed X-ing out the last days before the wedding. We even had two calendars in the house, one blackly webbed with scribbling, one clean and fresh.

Not anymore. Now I can't stand the damn things.

But I still need them.

I dumped the dirty dishes in the sink, pushed aside the rusty screen door on the back porch, and walked down the creaking wooden steps that lead out into the backyard. The calendars were there, hidden somewhere in the tired little shed the realtor had once shamelessly called a garage.

The screen door slammed behind me. I looked back at the house.

It's a small place, almost a cottage. When we first bought it the mortgage was as handsome as the building. Now that it's paid off, nobody wants it—the roof sags, and it needs paint. But no one complains. The far end of our place faces an empty canyon, and last summer the house next door was torn down. My nearest neighbors, the ones beside the weed-choked lot, don't even know I'm alive.

They drink. Almost as much as I do. At night I lie on the sofa in my cramped little living room, hazed by alcohol and the glow from a small black-and-white portable, and listen to them laugh . . . or scream.

The interior of the shed was cool and dark. It took me a while to remember where I'd hidden the calendars. I had to fumble around in the dim light with the stink of musty paper in my nose, poking through the stacks of her old clothes and my old tools until I found them. They were piled in a greasy cardboard box which had been pushed under a far corner of the workbench. I was probably drunk when I did that. I got down on my hands and knees, pulled the box out, and carried it into the house.

The container made a sodden thumping noise when I dropped it on the tiny kitchen table. I scraped back a chair, sat down, and regarded the box for a while. Then I glanced out the kitchen window. A leafless apricot tree quivered in the empty lot next door, its thin branches pawing at the fat leaden clouds behind it. For days the sky had been threatening to crack open. So far it hadn't.

I sighed, lit another cigarette, and pulled the pile of calendars out of the rotting box. A silverfish scuttled across my hand and forearm, then dropped to the floor near my foot. I crushed it.

There were nearly a dozen calendars in the stack, cheap little freebies

I'd impulsively picked up at banks and liquor stores. Last year's glared at me from the top of the pile. I pulled it away, flipped through its pages until I found December. A heavy red circle had been drawn around the twentieth with a felt-pen. Today was the twenty-second, which was just about right. It never happens on the same day, like birthdays or our anniversary, but it's always close. I still wonder about that.

A sudden tremor went through my legs, and my stomach constricted into a tight, painful knot. I closed my eyes and clenched my fists, concentrated on my breathing. My palms were damp. A long time ago I went to a doctor, before I really understood what was happening to me. He'd prodded, asked questions, then told me I was suffering from all the classic symptoms of acute anxiety attacks. Diligently I took the medicine he prescribed and the advice to "go slow."

It didn't work.

The cramp faded; the heat returned to my hands. I opened my eyes. Outside, the naked tree shuddered in the wind.

The rest of that day crawled by with agonizing slowness. I did the laundry, I made the bed. I even swept a little. Finally I just sat, smoking as I watched the shadows lengthen. By the time the sun went down I was ready to jump out of my skin. I'd stayed away from the booze all day, knowing I'd need some semblance of sobriety later on, but with the darkness came the realization that I'd never make it without a beer. I got up and went to the refrigerator.

Pulling a can from the six-pack that had been tempting me all that long, long afternoon, I popped the tab and drained it in a simple swallow. The fluid coldness hit like a fist. Some of the tension leaked away.

By now it was so dark I couldn't see the apricot tree. I got rid of the empty, opened another beer, and sipped it. Slowly.

*Time to leave.*

In the bedroom I put on an old pea coat and watch cap. The mirror above her dusty vanity table reflected a pale, pulpy wreck, someone aged far beyond his thirty-odd years. I raised my can in a mock salute. The shabby man in the mirror drank with me.

Out on the sidewalk the house looked like a dark beast settling into a freshly dug hole. I finished the second beer and tossed the empty can onto the patchy lawn, then climbed into our van and pulled away into the night.

I drove for hours, moving aimlessly along the freeways. The van was wrapped warm around me, the tires whispering on the asphalt, the radio playing just below my threshold of consciousness. It was almost relaxing.

Most of a fresh six-pack lay on the seat next to me. Although I'd already finished four beers, that terrible mental clarity alcohol sometimes brings had sunk its fingers deep into my brain and stubbornly refused to let go. I was glad I'd stopped at an all night market for the fresh brew. I'd need it.

I drove and drank, drank and drove. Cruising. The electric landscape of motels and warehouses and harshly lit Christmas-tree lots looked alien, deserted, like an abandoned lunar colony.

Some time later I got off the freeway. My hands must have registered the huge pink-and-blue neon sign that shouldered up against the frontage road ahead, because my brain didn't; I'd rolled down the off-ramp and was turning into one of the two narrow lanes that ran alongside that same neon sign before I consciously realized what I was doing.

Suddenly I knew where I was going: to the movies. I'd pulled into a drive-in.

I hadn't been to a drive-in for a long time. They hadn't changed much. I pulled up beside the small concert ticket booth that divided the two incoming lanes. A kid who looked about seventeen stepped out. He was tall, thin, wearing yellow foul-weather gear. When he leaned his gaunt face in my window, I could count the pimples on it.

I said, "One."

He spotted the beer on the passenger seat and frowned. Then he craned his head to look into the rear compartment of the van. My age and the fact that I was alone must have satisfied him; he smiled slightly and took the four singles out of my hand. But then he hesitated.

"Are you sure you wanna go in tonight?" he asked in a reedy drawl. "I mean, the weather's pretty lousy. Could turn to rain. 'Course we'll give you a pass to come back if it *does* rain or if any fog comes in, but then you might not want to see another show here. Not for a while, anyway. It'd save you the trouble. What do you say?"

I grinned up at his hopeful face. I'd worked in a theater too, ages ago. I knew he wasn't being courteous. If he discouraged enough potential customers, there'd be a light crowd inside, and he'd then be able to convince the manager or projectionist to close up and shoo everyone away at the first heavy sprinkle.

Fuck him.

"I'll take my chances," I said.

That stopped the conversation. The boy got my ticket and handed me the torn stub as if I'd just lectured him on the merits of good diet over bad complexion.

Inside, the harsh outdoor lights were up. I had come in between shows.

Not surprisingly, there were few cars there. My young friend had been doing right by himself.

Most of the cars were in the middle of the lot, separated from their neighbors by as wide a margin as possible. Hardly anyone was parked up front, near the screen. I went in the opposite direction, pulled into the very last row at the end, and shut the lights and engine off. Another beer found its way into my hand as I looked around me. The nearest car was at least twenty yards away. The van was nearly isolated. Good.

The drive-in was an old, dying place, its asphalt cracked and buckling. The only illumination came from three lamps strung up above a fading white screen. The small projection booth and snack bar looked like a grimy pillbox. When I hung a speaker on my window, I noticed that its companion had been torn from the pole, leaving only a frayed, dangling cord.

A gust of wind rocked the van. I sighed and turned up the stereo. Another atmosphere was beginning to seep into my still-tender nerves—the weight of the night, the chill of the wind. The music from the radio snapped at me like a loyal mechanical dog, trying to drive my restlessness away.

I cursed and took a deep drink of beer. The lights suddenly faded over the screen. Something scratchy whispered out of the speaker.

A cartoon came on.

An hour later, when I had almost finished the six-pack, it began to drizzle. I turned on the wipers until it stopped. It was cold inside the van, but the alcohol nuzzled with its false warmth. I hadn't paid much attention to the film. It was German, an old, grainy, dubbed western from the late sixties.

I rolled down the window and threw out an empty. The wind kicked it, clattered it across the undulating humps of the lot, rolling it up, down, away, toward the high wooden wall spotted with flaking green paint that surrounded that theater. When it bounced into the shadows cast by the wall, I lost interest. I picked up the final beer.

And I froze. Something had flickered in the corner of my eye. Something white. I turned around, strained to see. A faint patch of the whiteness was moving in the wall's deepest shadows. It grew larger.

Then Carol stepped out of the shadows and into the dim light.

She was still beautiful, still young, a tall, slender woman just this side of twenty. Her clothes were different, though; this time she was wearing a creamy Irish-knit sweater and dark designer jeans. *Always in style*, I

thought inanely. Her hair was long and blonde and sparkling, her oval face punctuated by those great wide lunar eyes.

She looked toward the van and saw me watching her. Taking a hesitant step forward, she smiled.

I hated her, then. The day-long tension that had been pulling, pulling, snapped and boiled over into pure naked loathing. I yanked at the door handle, sprang to the ground. My hand, still holding the unopened beer can, was trembling violently.

Carol took another step. I threw the can at her. It went wide, striking the wooden wall with a hollow *chunk*.

"Go away!" I yelled. "God damn it, leave me alone!"

We were close, close enough to read the expressions on each other's face. She seemed puzzled at first; then her gaze bored directly into my filthy, needy heart. She drew closer, finally stopping less than a yard away, the light from the screen highlighting her right profile. Darkness swallowed the rest of her face.

"Honey," she said hesitantly. "What's wrong?"

I groaned.

She closed the remaining distance between us and laid a hand on my cheek. "Honey, what is it?"

Her hand was solid, warm. Her fingertips caressed my skin, stroking away the hatred, soothing away the fear until I reached out, grabbed her hand with my own, and pulled her toward me. Carol came willingly, eagerly, her arms folding around my waist.

"Oh, Christ," I muttered. I hugged her, feeling the press of cloth, the warmth of body beneath. All that misery from the past year suddenly wrenched up into my throat. I cried uncontrollably, wracked and sobbing, the kind of crying where your eyes run and your nose runs and the saliva drips unheeded from your open, quivering mouth. All the while Carol held me, stroked my hair, crooned softly as I buried my face in her shoulder and brokenly choked out her name over and over again.

At last the tide of grief crested, broke, retreated. I managed to somehow pull away from her. Wiping my eyes. Carol's hair was matted against the side of her throat. She laughed and ran a hand through it.

Then she noticed my face. The pain. The hunger. Very slowly, Carol's hands ran down my forearms until they rested on my wrists. She gripped them tightly.

"Let's go back inside the car," she whispered.

Gently she tugged me toward the still-open door. I resisted, but I was weak with fear, weak with longing. She let go and entered the van first, squirmed around the steering wheel, and moved into the back.

Up on the screen an olive-skinned cowboy with startling blue eyes fell off his horse. I swallowed, wiped my nose on the back of my sleeve, and followed her in.

Carol was lying on the dirty polyfoam pad that serves as the van's bed. She'd taken her sweater off. A faint glimmer of light shone through the louvered glass windows and fell palely on her breasts, breasts that trembled slightly as she reached for me. Her hands touched my groin. Moved. She whispered my name.

I should have run, then. I should have leapt from the van and dashed from the theater, run or hitchhiked all the way to the ocean before throwing myself in.

But I didn't. I fell on the pad and drowned in her.

It wasn't sex, though that was part of it. It was mostly a shedding of pain and loneliness, and unfathomable sharing of love—dear God, so very, very much love. It was an impossible fusion, an intimate blending, and when we finally came apart the union was still there, bottomless, complete.

She lay with her naked hip against me, her hands lazily caressing the small of my back. For a long, long while we were simply content to be, cupped in a silence too comfortable for words. Finally she murmured something against my chest.

"What?" I said, shifting.

She moved her face until it was only inches from mine. Her eyes were languorous, satisfied, her breath warm against my lips. "I said, let's go home."

I bolted upright, grabbed her bare shoulders, almost knocked her off the pad. Under my fingers her skin was slick with perspiration. "Do you mean that?" I asked excitedly. "Do you?"

A wisp of concern drifted across her face, and sudden doubt assailed me. After all, this was something new. I tried to keep the urgency from my voice as I said, "*Can you? I mean, is it possible?*"

Her expression lightened. "Of course it's possible, you idiot." She rubbed my belly. "What's the matter? Don't you want to?"

In answer I leaned forward and kissed her—hard. The next moment I was slapping on my clothes and slipping into the driver's seat. I could hear Carol chuckling as she dressed.

I pulled out of the lane so quickly that I almost ripped the speaker pole out of the ground. Cursing, I shifted the engine into neutral, cranked down the window, and threw the speaker into the darkness. Carol came forward and plumped into the passenger's seat, giggling now.

"In a hurry?" She patted my thigh.



I didn't answer. There was a single, desperate image in my head. Carol and I. At home. Together.

I stamped on the accelerator, rushed up and down the tar-covered humps, almost bottomed out the van. Just before we reached the ticket booth I snapped on the lights. The pimply-faced kid in the yellow raincoat leaned out of the booth and saw the two of us as we screamed past him. I caught a last glimpse of the boy as we turned onto the frontage road. He gave us the finger.

Heater on, we sped onto the freeway, the interior of the van growing sultry. The greenish glow spilling from the dashboard lights softened Carol's features, caressing the full, sensuous mouth, the thin straight nose, the thick hair swept back from her forehead in twin foaming waves. Her head was propped against the cold window, her eyes heavy-lidded. She was humming softly to herself, the formless song of a child singing away the dark.

A horn sounded angrily. I'd been staring too long at her and had drifted toward another lane, almost tapping a small yellow Volks. It gave another bleat and surged ahead as I turned my eyes back to the road.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Carol lean forward. She pulled one of my hands off the wheel and squeezed it with both her own. Her grip was dry and tight.

"I've missed you, honey," she said softly.

A small, painful lump stuck in my throat. "Carol . . ."

"Shhh," she said. "It's all right now. Aren't we going home?"

"Yes," I told her, "yes. We are."

"And aren't we together?"

"Yes."

Which was, of course when it happened.

There was a loud, sudden *pop*. It sounded like a firecracker or a backfire, but backfires don't happen in the front seat. *It's a gunshot*, I told myself. Then I felt Carol's touch grow cold. I turned my head, half knowing what I would see.

I was wrong. It was worse than I'd imagined, worse than last year's knifing or the bludgeoning the year before that. Worse than any of them.

A small hole had opened in the passenger window, a hole through which the wind shrieked and from which a multitude of tiny cracks radiated outward through the glass. And Carol—

I couldn't help it. I screamed.

Half of her head was gone. It was as if some jagged, arbitrary line had been diagonally slashed across her face, beginning at the lower left jawbone and zigzagging upward to her right temple. Everything above

that line had been erased, had simply ceased to exist. A great gout of blood and bone was splashed across the windshield. I could see her *brains*.

I tried to drop my hand, but Carol's grip was impossibly strong, like iron. Still screaming, I stamped on the brakes. We went into a wild skid, fishtailing in a 180-degree arc. The dash lights shone brightly on her remaining eyeball as it swiveled in its socket to look right at me. What was left of her mouth dropped open; I could see her moving, shredded tongue.

"Darling," she slurred, in a tone of deepest sympathy. "What's wrong?" And she softly stroked my captive hand.

I went a little crazy. I kicked at the brakes, shrieking at the top of my lungs. Carol was flung violently away from me, hit hard against the door. The impact snapped it open, and she flipped out and disappeared into the blackness. Dimly I heard the sound of another horn, another set of squealing brakes, and a thud. Then the van's insane momentum slammed the door shut. A moment later the motor died, and with a bone-jarring jerk I came to a halt.

The van was pointing in the wrong direction, facing the oncoming traffic. But I'd been lucky. I'd skidded in a half-circle, stalling the engine and somehow slapping the wheels on the driver's side up against the low concrete ridge bordering the shoulder of the road. It was the ridge that had stopped me from flipping over.

I should have been panicked, hysterical, but I wasn't. If anything, I felt light-headed, relieved, even a little giddy. The nervousness was gone—completely.

It's always like that.

A dark four-door sedan pulled off the road in front of me. I winced as its headlights shone into my eyes. A moment later the driver notched them down to a dull glow and flung open his door. I watched him get out. He was a bald, muscular man, dressed in a cheap three-piece suit. Even in the glare of my lights, his face was whiter than it should have been. He looked terrified.

I climbed out of the van and met him halfway. He looked as if he were going to be sick.

"Jesus, mister!" he babbled. "Are you okay?"

I nodded. He didn't seem to notice.

"Jesus!" he said again. "I hit her! Honest to God, I didn't even see her until it was too late! One minute I'm thinking about getting home and the next minute the door opens up and she flies into my hood and her face, mister, God in heaven, her *face*—!"

I turned around, glanced at the van. The windshield in front of the passenger's seat was clean and unsoiled.

I turned back to the other man. His face was flushed, and he'd been waving his arms. Somewhere off to the side of the road, in the night-shrouded field that paralleled the freeway, a cricket chirped.

"It's all right," I said.

"What?" His perspiration glittered in the headlights. "We've got to find her! She's back there somewhere, lying on the road!"

My vision was misting over, softening his features and the hard silhouette of his car. I snickered at the sight of his bald head; it was sweating too. After all this time, the beer had finally hit. That's probably why I tried to explain. Usually I don't. But I felt sorry for him. Another innocent, touched by my sin.

"No," I told him. "She's not."

"Huh?" He blinked.

"My wife's not there," I repeated. "She's in a Mexican cemetery, outside Cabos San Lucas. We were honeymooning, you see. We had a fight. I guess I was drinking too much. I guess I hit her, too."

I paused, waiting, while a big eighteen-wheel rig thundered by. When I could talk without shouting I said, "She ran away. Where, I don't know. The next morning the police called. They'd found her in a ditch. Someone had choked her to death. Before that she'd been raped."

The man took a sudden backward step.

"So don't blame yourself," I reassured him. "Don't you see? It's not your fault. It's mine. She knows that. Besides," I added, "in a little while you won't even remember this. Any of it."

That was true. There had been other witnesses in the past, and other participants. But only I remember; only I can recall.

The bald man's expression had changed. His eyes were wider, and a new fear shone from them. He hunched up his shoulders as if he was afraid I was going to hit him. "Look, mister," he said unsteadily, "I don't know what you're talking about. All I know is that there's a lady back there, hurting real bad. Are you coming?"

I shook my head.

"All right," he said. "Okay." Suddenly he wheeled and bolted, ran back down the road. Just before the night absorbed him, he turned his head and yelled, "But I'm bringing back the cops!"

I listened to the sound of his clattering heels until I couldn't hear them anymore. By the time he'd run to the roadside emergency phone he was going to be feeling pretty stupid; the only thoughts in his mind would be, What am I doing *here*, and why am I not going home?

What the hell. I lit a cigarette and walked back to the van.

The remaining bullet hole in the passenger window mocked me. Another souvenir. As I got in and turned on the engine, I thought of this: Was there, even now, someone out there in that field? Someone slipping a rifle into its case or a pistol into a waistband, someone whose mind was frozen with horror or mad with exultation?

Maybe. And then again, maybe not.

Does it matter?

Getting the van turned around in that traffic was tricky, but I managed. On the way home, it began to rain.

It rained all that night.

This morning, when I woke up, I had a hangover—a small one. A little killer. So I walked down to the corner and bought a bottle of aspirin and another six-pack.

Before I left, I picked up another calendar.



## Red Christmas

David S. Garnett

*Born in Liverpool in 1947, David S. Garnett currently lives in West Sussex. He has had six science fiction books published under his name, the first of which, Mirror in the Sky, he wrote when he was nineteen. Other science fiction books are Time in Eclipse, The Starseekers, The Forgotten Dimension, Phantom Universe, and Cosmic Carousel. Under several other names he has written numerous other types of books, including the novelization of The Hills Have Eyes: Part Two, while even more pseudonyms have disguised his identity as the author of many short stories and articles and features in magazines whose pages are mostly filled with unclad ladies. "Red Christmas," first published in the holiday issue of one such magazine, Mayfair, appeared under the byline David Almandine. Garnett will have his joke.*

IT WAS ONLY eight o'clock, but already it was freezing. Richard Franks drove home carefully, and not until he had stopped his car in the driveway did he really believe it. For the first time in over a week he was home before midnight.

He tried the door with his key, then remembered he still had to ring the bell because his wife had left the bolt on. He heard her open the living room door, and saw the hall light come on.

"It's only me, Sue," he called.

"You're home early," she said, letting him in.

"You call this early?" he said, his lips brushing hers. He bolted and chained the door, then followed his wife down the hall and into the kitchen.

"Coffee?"

"Please."

"Dinner'll be ready soon. It hasn't had much time to get cold."

"Fine," said Richard. He put his bulging briefcase on the kitchen table. "I'll just put the car away. If I don't do it now, I won't want to later." He unbolted the back door.

"Maybe we'll have a white Christmas," said Susan, shivering as her husband let the cold air in.

"We might. But there's not much time left."

He went outside while Susan filled the kettle.

It was the night before Christmas Eve.

"Any progress?" Susan asked as she put his plate on the table.

Richard shook his head, and started eating.

"It would be nice if you could solve it before Christmas, then perhaps we'll have you home all day."

"I've told you I'll try my best to make it," said Richard between mouthfuls. "But if anything happens, I've got to be there. You know that. We can't expect the murderer to stop just because it's Christmas."

"There hasn't been one today?"

"No." Richard almost added: not yet. A murder every night for the past eight days, and the police had got nowhere with it. The papers called it a scandal, and the city lived in fear.

"Perhaps there won't be any more. He might stop."

"Stopping isn't good enough. We have to get him. A maniac's on the loose, and we're running around in circles. All leave's been canceled; mobile patrols have trebled. And still it goes on."

"You'll get him, dear," said Susan. "I know you will."

Richard knew it too. However long it took, no matter what it cost, this was one case he had to clear up. But he wondered how many more victims the madman would claim before he was trapped.

Richard was finishing his main course. Susan was pouring custard on the apple pie. Then the phone rang.

He was on his feet at once. "Franks," he said into the receiver. "Yes. Where? Jesus! Like the others? Yes, I'll be there in five minutes." He replaced the phone.

"Another?" said Susan, and he nodded.

"Haven't you time to eat this?"

"Keep it warm," Richard told her, but he knew that in a few minutes he'd have completely lost his appetite. He'd seen many murder victims during his career, but none had affected him like these. Perhaps, he reflected, I'm getting too old for this sort of thing; too conscious of my own mortality.

He put on his coat and scarf, hat and gloves. "I shouldn't be more than a couple of hours. There's nothing I can do there, but I've got to make an appearance." He opened the door, and gave her the same warning he

had for the past week. "Bolt the door. And don't open it to anyone but me. Anyone."

"Yes, Richard," said Susan.

Richard went out into the cold, the front door closing behind him. He looked up into the black, star-filled sky as he began walking. There was no moon tonight, but his route was well lit.

What he hadn't told Susan was that the murdered woman had lived only a quarter of a mile away, in a small house on one of the streets he'd come along only twenty minutes ago. It hadn't seemed worth getting his car out of the garage again. If he had to go to headquarters, he'd get a lift back in a patrol car. But Susan had probably noticed he was on foot, and she'd guess he wasn't going far. It couldn't be helped, he was on his way now.

As he walked, he tried to remember if he'd noticed anything unusual as he'd come along West Road. A handful of cars, a butcher's van delivering turkeys, a police car, two or three people walking, a bunch of kids carol singing. In none of the other cases had any of the neighbors seen or heard anything out of the ordinary, and Richard expected it would be the same here.

He arrived at the house at the same time as the ambulance. He pushed his way through the score of people standing and staring, and was dazzled by the flashbulb as a press photographer stepped out in front of him. He went around the man, ignoring the questions of the reporter who suddenly appeared by his side. Finally he got to the door, and a uniformed officer standing outside opened it for him.

The first thing Richard did was check the door. There were two solid bolts, a lock and a safety chain. One of the bolts, and the chain, were obviously new. But the chain was hanging down. It had been opened from inside. As with all the other victims, this woman had opened the door, and welcomed death.

Her body was in the front room, next to the overturned Christmas tree. The trail of blood led into the room from the hall. She'd managed to crawl three or four yards before finally collapsing—and she'd been stabbed every inch of the way. It was like all the others.

Richard only needed to look for a second. It was easy to tear his eyes away from the corpse, but his nose couldn't block the sickly-sweet scent of the blood. He tasted his meal in the back of his throat, and wished he hadn't eaten it.

"Hello, Mal," he said to the man standing by the fireplace, his cigarette dripping ash onto the carpet.

"Looks like you didn't get an early night after all," said Malcolm Kegan.



He inclined his head toward the body, surrounded by the men taking photographs, and measuring and testing. "Same as usual. She let the killer in. Back door and windows still secure. Wasn't robbed or sexually assaulted. The place smashed up a little."

"How long ago?"

"No more than an hour. That's when her husband went on the night-shift. A car picked him up. He's in the kitchen at the back. Want to see him?"

"Later," said Richard. "I came by this way half an hour ago. There was a butcher's van on the other side, fifty yards down. Better check it. Ask the neighbors, usual thing."

"The man next door found her," said Mal. "He came to bring a Christmas card that had been delivered wrongly. When he didn't get a reply, he looked through the window, and saw her."

"What's her name?"

"Campbell. Jane Campbell. She teaches part time at the school down the road."

"Check on the postman," said Richard.

"As always."

"Yes. As always."

The postman was the only person they'd been able to think of for whom people would open their doors under present circumstances. At this time of year, everyone got deliveries. Other people who went from house to house, such as electricity meter readers, usually carried identification. And they kept daylight hours, and didn't have to work through into the evening. But even they would be checked and re-checked.

Richard surveyed the room, trying to imagine how it had been as the murderer left: the hacked corpse and the blood, the toppled tree, the smashed ornaments, the litter on the floor—tinsel, wrappers, scattered nuts, the empty lemonade bottle, the full bottle of scotch beneath the fallen string of Christmas cards.

What kind of ghoul could be responsible for such an atrocity?

It didn't make sense. For Richard Franks every crime had to have a motive of some sort. Where murder was concerned, the reason could be anything from anger to robbery. It could be committed in the heat of the moment, or meticulously planned. But something like this? The fact that it went on and on, that each night there had been another death, made it seem even harder to comprehend.

Who would stab a forty-year-old woman a hundred times, then pull down the decorations, and leave? It had to be someone Mrs. Campbell knew or trusted, or else she wouldn't have let him in.

Him? The killer could equally have been a woman. But murders like this weren't usually the crime of a woman. Yet how many series of murders such as these had there ever been? Very few, Richard knew.

Or there might have been more than one murderer. Another theory was that the different killings had been committed by different people—as if murder was an infectious disease. Richard didn't think much of this notion, but he couldn't discard it. Any idea, however crazy, had to be examined.

Yet the fact remained that all the victims had opened their doors, and those with safety chains had undone them. Three men were included among those murdered. Two of them had been in their forties, and might have been expected to put up some resistance. The other was a retired dentist, slain with his elderly wife in the only double killing on the murderer's score card.

Richard went looking for the woman's husband, but he found himself in the kitchen. The fridge door was open, and there was an empty bottle of milk lying on the mat. Next to it were several pieces of broken glass.

Turning, Richard went to talk to Mr. Campbell. And, as ever, he wondered what he could possibly say.

Richard was home even earlier the next night. He'd got past the stage of pretending to do something even when there was nothing he could do. It was best if he stayed at home tonight—or at least until the inevitable phone call—because he probably wouldn't get much time at home tomorrow. How many years was it since he'd been here for Christmas dinner?

"I'm glad you're here," said Susan. "I feel much safer."

"Don't be silly. Everyone's perfectly safe so long as they keep the door locked. Christ knows how many times we've told them. People are stupid. They simply ask for it."

"You shouldn't talk like that."

"Well, it's true. We can have a car anywhere in town within ninety seconds of a phone call."

"Not everyone has a phone," Susan reminded him.

"All but two of those murdered did."

"You won't have to go out again, will you? Even if there is another one, you said yourself there's nothing you personally can do."

"There doesn't seem anything anyone can do," said Richard, "But that doesn't mean we can stop trying. Yet it does seem that once he's done one, he goes home to bed. So everyone's safe after that."

"That's been the pattern so far, but what—" Richard cut her off. "Don't

say any more. Let's have a bit of the Christmas spirit. How about a vodka and lime?"

"Yes please. But only a small one, or you'll never get your dinner."

Richard poured himself a whisky, then handed his wife her vodka. He raised his glass. "Here's to crime."

"That's not very funny anymore."

Richard shrugged and started drinking. "You've made a nice job of the tree," he said.

"It's been like that for days if you'd noticed," his wife called as she went into the kitchen.

Franks didn't know why she bothered. There were just the two of them now. Colin would be bringing his wife and one-year-old son tomorrow, but Anne and her husband lived too far away to come.

Richard felt he had every reason to be pleased with the way they'd brought up their family. Both their son and daughter had been to university, and had settled into good jobs before marrying. But he didn't envy them the task of bringing up children in this undisciplined decade.

It did kids good to go without. When he'd been a boy, he'd had nothing, now children wanted everything—and usually got it. When he'd gone to buy something for his grandson, Raymond, he had been amazed at the stuff on sale.

All those toy guns and weapons and Junior Mugger sets. It was no wonder kids turned into juvenile delinquents. Richard blamed television too. It simply wasn't proper to allow developing minds to watch some of those programs. They'd grow up with completely wrong ideas about society and law, about death and violence. They'd have no sense of right or wrong.

But Richard knew his views weren't held by the majority, and he had learned to keep quiet. Everyone was entitled to their own opinion. Yet it was a pity that everyone had the wrong opinion. If it wasn't safe to walk the streets tonight, he hated to think how it would be in ten or twenty years.

Richard refilled his tumbler, and stood looking at the tree. It was about the same size as the one in that woman's house, Mrs. Campbell. Decorated in the same way, with tinsel and silver balls and colored bulbs and metal stars and chocolate novelties. He smiled. Who did Susan think would eat those? Timothy was only eleven months old. He glanced toward the hatch, then unhooked a chocolate pocket watch, stabbing himself with green pine needles. He pried off the silver foil, and bit the chocolate in two. As he went to drop the wrapper in the bin, it fell out of his hand.

He looked at it on the floor, trying to remember why it seemed so familiar. Then he remembered the foil wrappers in the murder house last night. They too must have come from a Christmas tree. The killer had eaten them. Could it be that he'd pulled the tree over to get at them?

Sitting down, the glass in his hand forgotten, Richard stared at the tree, his mind going back to the previous night. The chocolate wrappers. The empty lemonade bottle. The empty milk bottle. Perhaps the killer was mentally retarded. Or teetotal. He smiled to himself for a moment, then it was gone.

Suddenly it came to him. It was so simple. So simple yet so unbelievable.

He got up and walked to the telephone. As he began to dial, he heard voices start to sing outside the front door.

*Once in Royal David's city . . .*

And the doorbell rang. Richard hardly noticed the bell or the singing. He'd somehow dialed the wrong number, and had to start again.

He saw Susan go past him into the hall, subconsciously knowing that she was going to peep through the window to see who was at the door. A few seconds later, he got through.

"Yes, Rich?" said Malcolm Kegan.

Richard didn't answer. He dropped the phone, and ran into the hall. Susan had drawn the bolt, and undone the chain, and now she was turning the latch.

"Susan!" he yelled. "No!"

His wife turned and looked at him, "But they're only children," she said, beginning to open her purse to give them something.

Then the door was pushed open, Susan knocked aside, and silently they rushed in. There were about ten of them, aged seven or eight. Their eyes were bright, their cheeks rosy, and the knives they pulled out of their pockets, and held in their woolly-gloved hands, were very sharp.

Susan backed away to stand next to Richard as the deadly choir moved swiftly toward them. As the last one closed the door, Richard noticed that it had started to snow.



# Too Far Behind Gardina

Steve Sneyd

*Steve Sneyd was born in 1941 in Maidenhead, Berkshire, and now lives in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire—where Robin Hood is said to have been buried. Presently he is employed as a copy-writer for a regional evening newspaper. Sneyd's interests include visiting castles, pubs, walking, photography, and reading crime and historical books. Sneyd is primarily a poet, whose work has appeared extensively in small press publications throughout the world. His fiction has been published in Whispers, Dark Dreams, and other little magazines, in addition to book appearances in Whispers III and in The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series VIII. Sneyd's work has also appeared in a dozen or more booklets—among them: Four Minute Island, The Rex Quondam File, Star For Head And Feet, and The Pleasing Creatures. "Too Far Behind Gardina" also was first published as a separate booklet by SF Spectrum Publications Ltd. The novella is an unnerving tour de force that only a gifted poet could have accomplished. It is Sneyd's most ambitious work, and it is my privilege to be able to present it to the wider audience it deserves.*

## PROLOGUE:

*the master speaks in the castle . . .*

i give moths a light everlasting as fate against which  
to beat and blast and burn themselves  
in an intolerable excess of unanswered love

i give the wasps too what they wish a place a face  
against which to crash the  
scent that drives them mad rotting mankind to ape for them  
a summer's end in which to end in  
sting-desperate with frustration of  
the sexy senses of nearing dying and

so little time to waste

the peasant torn between God's warning  
& the hand of communist man promising  
car TV a dishwasher  
I give a third alternative

against which the other two can  
unite & fight & reknit  
his shriveled personality  
stretched thin between  
this year and 1550

lizards their wish to become inconspicuous i give  
no tail i leave them to show them up  
blocking the bright  
ness of the day when all they wish  
thick with self-shame and  
sense of insufficiency is to  
drop out of sight and live on  
indivisibly invisible  
among great tangled roots

& to you you foolish new people  
so faithless you have become  
incredibly more credulous than maddest  
bigot or fanatic of  
these blackcloaked churches who  
slaver upon the agony the Crucified appears  
to demonstrate,  
you I will give just what you wish

name it and I

will interpret the dish you seek  
as does a master chef to make  
from cheap ingredients a lake  
of fire a cake whose icing is the  
farthest stars  
and bake your half-formed thoughts to slake  
the agony you dare not speak

the longing deep as woman's gate  
to suffer that is all your fate

which otherwise like amateurs  
you practice in badly-driven cars  
or with a cigarette or beers  
shoved down your throat the nearest you dare go

towards taking

poison to annoy

a universe that will not love you.

"HAVE A NICE holiday, dear?"—pouring tea with the smooth automatic motions of a Longbridge assembly-line worker as she spoke.

It was the day after getting home, and Mariella still dazed by going and by coming back, and her mother tranquilly warm and ripe to bursting with a fortnight's pent-up gossip, longing to get the ritual inquiry about their holiday over with so she could launch guiltless and unchecked into her own preoccupations with neighbors' petty spites and sillinesses and the latest calls on people who'd got above themselves on the street by the friendly neighborhood bailiff . . .

And rather than scream, or try to explain to someone who as long as she could remember wished only to know that her own brood were tidy and clean and hard-working so she could out-face any gossip, and never ever wanted to look below the smoothness of the skin, Mariella merely said, "Yes, fine."

"And the hotel?"

"Really nice."

"And the children?"

"They loved it—we're just waiting for the photographs back. How have you been?"

And the subject was safely forgotten for the moment at least, buried in a safe avalanche of brightly catty trivia. "For which relief great thanks," thought Mariella—and then remembered the quote was one of her husband's favorites, and mentally cursed again how he maggoted her brain.



And still none of it all made any real pattern of sense or logic anyhow. Colin always said she was scatterbrained, yet when he wasn't there to make her every word seem foolish by interruption or pitying "ignore the little woman, she's only a dumb blonde anyhow" smile, she could think and talk as clearly at least as most, and certainly more than most of those girls she'd been to school with: but this—it was beyond her.

A fortnight's holiday: so long looked forward to, so planned for even to minutiae of suntan oils and seasick pills and drawing books to quiet the children, towels in case the hotel ones were too harsh, and every other damn fool thing enjoyed in the preparations, just because it was, even the relentless ticking off of lists of must-take necessities, part of preparations for a change, an escape.

And then, when they'd got there, the whole fortnight, up to the very last day anyway, had been so dreadfully sane at "their" hotel in "their" resort, her family unchanged and her escape each day postponed, she might as well have stayed at home—as if all those months' anticipation of a change as unimaginably great as leaving school had once seemed, full of dreams and possibilities, was just one more proof after all that life always has you by the short and curlies and never more so than when you're fool enough to look forward to something new too much.

As for the last day before the return to good old Helmebridge where life had began and doubtless had already ended, well that day she could neither discuss with anyone nor really with herself: nightmare was the only word she could think of, desperately trying to cocoon it away in unreality like a late night, too frightening TV play you laugh off the next day: and never never would she even begin to admit to herself, she thought, that something like that had really been what she had longed for all along.

And watching her mother's hands, still busy shifting cakes and plates and teapot in parody of genteel hospitality as if it were a Lord Lieutenant she entertained, not her daughter, the occasion rather than the person mattering most as trigger for the ritual, Mariella, letting the bright stream of chatter flow over her unheard save with enough unconscious understanding to answer "Yes" or "Fancy" a nibbling leer at the edge of thought, go back over that last day in Gradina as their package holiday on "the Adriatic coast, pearl of the Mediterranean's unspoiled holiday playgrounds," neared its predestined end.

All holiday Colin had been busy as a bee putting himself across as Mr. Knowitall, insisting at the top of crow-harsh voice on telling all the fellow passengers every last detail of history, geography, place of note, in this place or that they went to on excursions, his facts all culled from an

extensive guidebook bought the first day, not for any pleasure of knowledge, she was sure, but merely to be sure of always being one up, the man “who knew what’s what,” even to correcting guides, insisting on trying to bargain down the price of the boat already hired by the courier to take them to the Roman temple in a grotto across the lake, even insisting on some obscure wine which of course the hotel didn’t have although the guidebook said it came from nearby: and causing a scene till the manager in person swore that vineyard destroyed by the war, no wine still made—and everything had been like that, day after day . . . Colin shouting the kids down every time the least spontaneous shout of joy or excitement at some new sight had interrupted one of his set-piece lectures at what they *should* be looking at, as in an old donkey running mad in a field while a bewildered little boy shrieked after it helplessly couldn’t, and wasn’t bound to be, ten times as exciting to an eight and a ten year old as some pile of shapeless Turkish stones?

Maddening, doubtless, the middle-aged fellow passengers, who for some reason known only to himself he had set out to impress, yet could not forbear to show contempt loudly toward every time they preferred shops or a cafe to endless meticulous examination of every sight the guidebook listed that they came near.

And, whenever Mariella asked him to look after the kids for an hour or so, while she had a headache (her period, that, just like her luck, came right in the middle of the holiday and left her pained, listless, longing only to crawl into a hole and hide for days), all he could say was “Can’t you manage them anymore, then?”, cool superiority and telltale irritation showing in frown wrinkles deepening, in a combination that made her ready to shriek with frustration.

The morning of the last day came, and she at last rebelled. There hadn’t been, she knew as clear as she knew she was awake as the light dancing off harbor water walked across the shadowed ceiling, and Colin snored still (something he always swore he never did), one whole hour save in sleep she’d really had to herself—or had chance to be herself—all through the holiday, holiday so-called that was, when except for cooking she had every other bit of the running round after husband and children that made up time at home too, even the hours they were away at work or school taken up with starting meals ready, mending clothes, doing Colin’s endless errands to bank, library, post office, building society, that he would not do himself yet was ever ready to instruct her how to carry out as if to a child, “Say this to the TV people, say that to the electricity people,” never-ending instruction. And just this one day had to be hers, saved out of all the anticipation, out of all this year at least.

Not that she rebelled directly: she could not have faced Colin's sulks, his attempts to foist the kids on her and escape himself, feeling a bigger man still with no children around to remind him he was not as young as he was, or even the children asking, "Why aren't you going with us today, Mum?", treating her as a possession necessarily kept in sight all the time lest it stray or be nicked, like the dog or train set or the dolls at home.

No: she deliberately toyed with her breakfast, finishing neither bread and apricot jam nor coffee, ignoring the children, leaning at least head in hand till reluctantly, following necessary pattern gracelessly like a wild animal posing as laboratory specimen to escape detection, Colin asked, "What's up?"

"Sorry, Colin, I don't feel so well. I've got a sick headache, maybe that wine last night."

"You'd better go back to bed, take an aspirin and lie down." Reluctant the concession: obviously he expected her to say "I'll be all right."

But she took his words at face value, "Yes, if you don't mind I think that'd be better. You wouldn't mind taking the kids to the Falls and the Pirate Town with the others, would you? I'm sure they'll be good." A perfect trap: Colin did try saying, "Don't you want me to stay and look after you?" but she insisted she didn't want them to miss a treat so long looked forward to, and knowing how many pages in the guidebook there were about both places, so many nuggets for Colin to bring out and show his cleverness, she was sure this impulse would override his unwillingness to be stuck with the kids, particularly when she casually motioned the kids to say "good morning" to the coach-driver, the one who with nine kids of his own was immune, even liked children, and so reminded Colin by this hint that after all the driver'd probably be willing to let their two stick with him most of the day, relieving Colin.

So, at last, *at last*, leaving abruptly at the end, his unwillingness to waste sympathy on anyone but himself so rope-strong he was obviously maddened by having to offer comfort to Mariella's well-timed groans, Colin was off into the big Routemaster coach, busy at one and the same time grabbing a seat good for photography and issuing unwanted advice to everybody else, fellow passengers too far past youth or too polite to tell him to piss off: and the kids, too, aboard, waving, perched on the engine by the driver's casually-given leave, both looking so sweet she almost regretted not keeping them at least with her for the day: too late, they were gone, the dust puffing up from the cracked dry road round the headland from the hotel into the town: and a few minutes later, as she lingered over the coffee, enjoyable now with her jailor gone, the coach reappeared across the bay, climbing the headland road through pines to

swing out of sight, she guiltily an instant imagining Colin could somehow see across all that distance and spot her beginning to dare to relax and enjoy herself.

And the coach was gone: only the headland, and the little boats, and, far above, the great half-seen fortress that no matter how clear the day had never really been sharply visible, that in Colin's book had been a last-ditch hold against Romans, Venetians and Turks alike, loomed.

She did not wait to try to see the coach's dust reappear far off where the coast-road looped again along the inland sea, or bay it was really, but finished her coffee, though no waiters hovered. They never seemed to here—and climbed back to the room to collect her things and try to decide which of the many treats she could have today she wanted to do first, temporarily paralyzed from decision as when in a sale of clothes too many things attracted her till she dare not try to decide, each choice so fraught with possibilities to make a fool of herself—and whichever choice she didn't take doubtless the one that would have made her unimaginably happy.

And lay a few minutes on the bed, trapped by inertia while these precious minutes moved by. A cigarette: that'd help her think.

A whole day before her: they wouldn't be back till seven at the earliest, the courier'd said; and she could blissfully do nothing, lying on one of the concrete slabs set like islands among the rocks of the beach, each more inviting than the next. Or walk past the campsite where perhaps if she were alone one of the bronzed young men who'd doubtless been here all summer would revive her spirits by whistling, out through the groves of olives where no one seemed to bother with the fruit and each tree sat in its own man-high wall of stones laboriously picked like Cyclops' monument, so the book said, over years to make clear patches of soil for the tree's growing: to end at the lighthouse with its lace-shimmer of tiny fish about the water at its foot.

She could perhaps sit on the hotel terrace and order wine—and drink it without having to listen to Colin telling her at every sip what it ought to taste like and what she should watch for in the way of impudence or subtlety or raw inferiority to Reisling, as if she didn't know damn well he got all his knowhow out of the Observer Color Supplement.

The smoke from her cigarette curled against curtain. A sound of movement down the corridor: the maid on her way, doubtless—she'd have to move to let the woman get at bed and room. That was the one thing that she hated about the holiday that even Colin being different wouldn't have altered: having people fussing round, waiting on you at meals and doing the bed and things that you'd much rather do yourself

and get done with. Colin said she was silly, that these people'd be out of work if they didn't work in the hotels, and anyway they enjoyed it, and what did it being called a socialist country have to do with it, she was just old-fashioned and ignorant. End of conversation. Mariella a fool again . . . o forget him, damn it; he was out of the way for a day; try not to think of him once. As soon as she thought that, of course, she thought of him even more—like the last day of school holidays not all that long ago, really, Christ, eleven years if she thought about it, anyway, the more you tried not to think of school tomorrow, the more you thought of it.

Concentrate: get up, sensible rope-soled shoes on, she'd've loved some of those really silly embroidered peasantry ones but Colin said they weren't genuine Dalmatain work, just made to fool tourists and he wasn't being fooled, so no peasant shoes. Come on—forget the bastard . . . Oh, she put her hand to her mouth; as if lightning was going to hit her, or her mother from 2000 or whatever it was miles off. Talking about her husband that way.

Resolutely she refused to let her day be spoiled.

She put in her bag everything she'd need; whether she went on the beach, the flowered bra and pants she had on'd do as a bikini like they'd had to all holiday, Colin always so ready to say indifferently, "You look fine," and never ever bothering to buy her or even let her buy for herself, things new enough to let her convince her mirror she was still young and desirable, not even letting her go out to work and make some money to spend on herself, oh no that'd look as if he, a supermarket manager with a degree, couldn't support his family himself. Bastard: he'd only married her to have someone to look down on. He wanted her to get wrinkled and ugly so he'd be sure she wouldn't dare get away from him, she'd never find anyone else.

She clenched her fists, her teeth, "Forget him," she screeched at the mirror. The maid appeared, neat and cool-looking in black and white uniform, faint puzzled air on face, mop in hand all feathers like a stuffed museum duck in dusty Millby Hall back home, "Madam?"

"Never mind, it doesn't matter."

"Plizz?"

"I'm going out, here's the key," a huge wooden-handled thing with number on like a dungeon-ward. Smile from the maid, the situation explained.

Down through the hotel's dark corridors, past reception and the waiters, between meals watching "On the Buses" with subtitles and cackling like wicked children, out into the sun and the path round past the terrace to the beach . . .

Should she have gone to the village instead. She could for once have strolled round and really looked at things she was interested in, the children and the school and what was in the shops and which houses were being rebuilt and how were they furnished and the little hidden courtyard gardens glimpsed suddenly, without the endless embarrassment of Colin dragging you along and insisting at regular intervals on trying out his German, even she who knew the language not at all knew it was as garbled as Mr. Heath's French, stopping villagers and asking silly questions and then, if they misunderstood, didn't or wouldn't understand (and why should they in a place with thirty-nine dead listed on the Partisan Memorial in the Square, killed by the Germans; sentimental, he'd called her again, a fool, when she dared humbly mention that, "These people want money same as anywhere else, they don't care whose it is,") Colin mocked them as stupid, or insisted without a by-your-leave on photographing them, "Picturesque aren't they; that old woman there, like a Greek Fury" never "Like, truly, herself": everybody was that to him, some symbol, some ventriloquist's stage dummy or spear-carrier extra in the unending performance of his own so-significant life . . .

Ah, the lovely shade now, a tree that overhung the tiny fishermen's chapel at the point, no bigger than an English garage, and crammed, she'd seen Sunday when the door opened, though she daren't suggest going in to Colin lest he start photographing in the midst of the service, the inside crammed with wood-carved model boats, a couple of feet long each, hung like lamps from the roof, so she longed to have one to give her son, some sort of thank offering for miraculous escapes from the jaws of the sea, so the girl on the reception desk had said in her curiously elaborate textbook English. And unintentionally she relaxed there, cool in the shade yet eyes dazzled even so by the light's reflected darting off the water, where apparently equally entranced just one boat hung, in it a local still as silence, spear from his hand trailing the water, spear, more like a trident really, doubtless seeking mussels though how he'd catch them without movement she'd no idea.

She caught herself unconsciously searching her bag to make sure she'd the kids' stuff too, bandages and toys and towels and everything, and realized this one day at least she'd no need for more than what was there, her own towel, lovely and fluffy, not like the hotel one: Ornaja fruit-juice, the strange triangulate pack you just bit a corner off and let it trickle harsh-sweet into your mouth: sun oil, some weird local brand but it worked: and, sneaked out from its hiding place in the case, "Maigret in Montmartre": her first chance to read it without Colin mocking her crude

tastes, “a real TV addict’s choice.” Everything there—the beach only a few yards more. But somehow the heat held her paralyzed, or rather the heat she knew she’d enter the instant she left the tree’s coolness.

The receptionist passed: smile and a wave, heading toward the village. Funny girl in some ways, Mariella had talked to her one evening when there’d been a sort of party for guests and staff alike on the terrace, and dancing to a scratched ancient collection of rock-n-roll records the Head Waiter cherished like the FA Cup, or the European Cup it’d be here, something called Hajuk Zadar they all followed it seemed, name painted on walls miles from anywhere the coach had passed, “Rubbish” Collin’d said they were, fancying himself on knowledge of football like everything else. Colin had had to burst in, gushing misplaced charm on the woman and spoiling the conversation, but Mariella had found out from her a strange mixture of attitudes. A graduate of Zagreb University her father the local Communist Party chief, mayor, something like that, and her contempt apparently equally fierce for the local fishermen, idle children she called them, superstitious.

Catholics, pretending to be poor because they wouldn’t work, and for the city people she’d known, parasites, false sophisticates, bureaucrats: her father was a foolish idealist, his atheism a thin veneer, she said yet she stuck close to him, to the village. Why?

No guessing without sufficient evidence, Maigret would say, or would he. Speculating, her mind engrossed, Mariella moved automatically as a lizard dominates the hottest part of the beach, a sloping stretch of the concrete like an invalid bed. Oil rubbed smoothly on, an instant regretting Colin wasn’t there to do her back: then stretch out, eyes shut, do the back first, head down on arms, snuggle into relaxation: and still her mind on the puzzle of the receptionist.

She knew why her own interest: Colin obviously fancied her. She knew the signs by now: the stares when he thought Mariella wasn’t looking, the sly avoidance of the subject if she mentioned the woman, all the traces of his usual approach, one thing that at least did let her feel one up on him, to be able to see through him and at the same time to realize how shocked he’d be at how transparent his feeble attempts at luring women just by staring at them, feeling too superior doubtless to try to chat them up, really were. Probably thought he’d only to look at them and they’d fall at his feet, blinded by his glory.

Still she’d near as dammit done that once.

Of course she was only a young girl then, she’d excuse . . . Oh, forget it.

A slight shiver between her shoulders. Must be a slight breeze up. Open

eyes, read a few pages of Maigret. No good, couldn't concentrate, kept having to look back to see which was the victim.

Look out at the fisherman, a few yards farther on now, still in the same position, as if he, boat, spear and all had beamed like Captain Kirk: no sound of rowing, anyway: all unshaven he was, but they were real muscles under that scruffy sleeveless shirt. Saw her look, and waved, a minimal wave, like royalty to the crowd. Thought she was eyeing him up, did he . . . hot shame . . . eyes shut again . . . and a trance deep now coming on, as if she sank below the mirrored surface of the sea, down among the small fish . . . into coolness and silence . . . a shadow, a cavern, something biting at her . . . hot . . . Maigret's pipe, what was it doing *there* . . . hand grappling at her thigh . . . wide awake . . . embarrassed look round, had anyone seen her sudden electric movement . . . must've been a wasp or mosquito or something . . . hand moved round . . . no sign of a spot: daren't scratch properly, what would people think . . .

Not many on the beach now, anyway, with most of the English lot off on the coach . . .

Thoroughly wakened, wondering how she came to think she'd rolled over on her back: in her half-sleep perhaps.

A look far over at the ore ships: eyes scanned round and, just a few feet away along the beach, where she was sure they'd not been a minute or two before even, the Germans . . .

Both their eyes seemed to meet hers with a kindly pity as if to say "We knew you'd have to look at us. Don't worry, we don't mind being adored . . . don't be embarrassed child, it is permitted if you show proper respect." Superior bastards . . . or bastard and bitch, really . . . thought they owned the Earth, she could tell just looking at them.

Brother and sister the waiter said they were: and the Hotel had all the passports, so it was probably true.

The brother, such a suave cripple he was, beard and elegant movement like, had he been twenty years older, Svengali the Master to the life: the sister, hipbones swelling up like an old church's arches out of the yellow bikini so small you'd think the Germans suffered cloth rationing. Arrogant bastards—so self-consciously, no self-confidently beautiful, and probably, Mariella thought, pleased in this heat-daze she too could do the kind of psychological assessment of people Colin thought only he could do, it was their very arrogant aloofness that seemed to make each of the English coach party, and Colin most of all, try to make up to them, as if they were the only interesting people among all the sardine-tin identicals each British tourist thought all his or her fellow travelers were



. . . Colin, ah that was good the way several evenings when he thought Mariella wasn't looking had approached them glowing with his conviction that to him soul-kinship with Germans was as natural as breathing, and each time been so coldly rebuffed . . . even the way he took it out on her with even more than the usual contempt for her words or opinions, till she almost gave up speaking at all, even that was worth it . . .

And now, despite her dislike of them, Mariella could not help watching their every move, feeling somehow they swelled and filled the vast space of beach and sea and far-off mountains as if it were a tiny room too small for them, till they seemed to press up on her body like large people in the Underground, never doubting the space was theirs by right that by some flaw or accident of the universe she for this instant occupied.

The girl put the black book, diary it must be, she seemed to be scribbling in, world-indifferent, every time Mariella saw her, alike at meals or in the bar or on the beach aside, and dived into the water, breasts shark-sharp appearing instants later at the surface as she floated up on her back: the man on the boat seemed almost to lose his statue quality for an instant, in fact to teeter and lose his grace of heron-balance as he looked at her.

The brother, wasted leg twisted as if to point to her like setter's nose in an aristocrat-hunting film, otherwise, with his face at least, ignored her.

Seeming to look straight through Mariella till she closed her eyes again in fright, hoping, like the terror of a childhood nightmare, doing that'd make it go away.

When she, against her will, and having, so childishly she was ashamed of herself, counted 100 to make it safe, as a compromise between fear and impulse, opened them again, he was gone . . .

In the water now, moving toward his sister far out now at the edge of vision, his movement making it seem as if the Byron-crippled leg that turned his swimming into a fierce, misshapen, yet curiously graceful, greatness full even Leviathan or Ahab-whale thrashing, becoming an inherent total part of himself so that she couldn't imagine him perfect, a blond perfection too terrifying to permit other life on earth around it, terrible enough even in this state as if torn by great pincers all along one side from the womb so that leg became horrid, flaccid, shrunk and yet swollen with purple scar or mouthlike lumps, and arm of the same left side turned oddly outward and so milk-white, birdbone-transparent slim, so huge a contrast to the tan of the rest of him.

The water fountained as brother and sister met: they seemed to

enwrap in some game like a so-slow-motion football action replay or car crash and then sink.

A few minutes later, when Mariella looked again, a black speck marked the girl still swimming outward: the brother was ashore again, laid still where he had been before as if he'd never moved: he seemed waiting for something, perhaps her eyes on him: his eyes curiously hooded and yet perplexingly seeming, one anyway, the left one, bigger than it should have been, unblinking like an owl's eye or Henry Ford's: yes, it was true, the two halves of his face didn't match—embarrassed, after all one shouldn't stare at cripples, even if it hadn't been his leg she was looking at, she tried to pull her eyes away.

And couldn't help seeing, in his tiny modern trunks black as those sea urchins the kids nearly kept stepping on and then bringing up to the surface with pointed sticks to dance upon their spikes in the process of dying into husk on the breakwater, revenge Colin encouraged for one he'd stepped on the first day here, that in those black briefs a huge bulge had appeared—and her eyes could not move, trapped like nut between nutcracker . . .

And for an instant she wished Colin'd appear and keep her safe—she'd even be glad to see all the rest of the English party back that doubtless now as every day were celebrating the absence of licensing hours in this country by having their first flask of wine at just the time the pubs would have legally opened up back home.

The pattern seemed to be repeating at ever-diminishing intervals, as if time was accelerating: her eyes closed again to shut out this further event, or sight rather as solid and precise on her eyeballs as an event: inside her head a vision like the "facts" that become so precise yet unrecapturable of half-sleep half-awake early morning states spelled out what could happen if her eyes by mistake should open: that black bulge could swell and burst her like a kid's balloon, shooting aimlessly in terror round a room emptying its air to nothing, or could even worse burst all over her horribly, a slime sac like that squid's in the old Captain Nemo film or even worse because pitiful as well as horrible the one all curiously peacock color, a little thing, only two big tentacles like a squid really, glistening hopeless and doglike under a fisherman's arm the way you'd carry a bagpipe, the day before yesterday on the market, exposed to sun and buying eyes and yet terrifying because so detached from ordinary reality, as her knee was that time when about ten she'd fallen in a half-demolished house and stuck it on a rusty girder and it had all swollen and begun to drip vile green pus and she'd been at home all lost, waiting for Mum or Dad to come home from work, not daring to go for help for

fear of their anger at her not being where she should be or having disobeyed instructions not to go in the old houses. And the green pus creeping out till she longed to touch it, lick it, see what it was like to taste, and the swelling winking at her and even the pain company in a way.

And was convinced as she lay there, sweat creeping down her back and hair, that he was watching, that German, smiling in a complicity of complete understanding of what she was thinking, not even contemptuous that she daren't open her eyes and see him watching, merely understanding like some godlike parent, the lie they used to tell 'em in R.I. courses before she was old enough to be sure she knew better.

The beach seemed so silent it must have emptied in, her sleeplike thoughts drummed out, emptied of everybody but her and him as if a WWII filmset . . . sleep must've crept over her like an escape because suddenly there was Colin's voice in her ear saying, "Where *has* Robert got to now?"—irritation and unwillingness to go look himself and risk disruption of his own smooth self-absorption mised as smooth as gloss: she'd have to move, and she was so comfortable . . . it wasn't fair . . . what was the bastard saying *now*?

Opened eyes, straightened up onto her arms, head up and the light filling it like a blow: figure above her, still speaking.

And before she could clearly take in that it couldn't be Colin, *couldn't* be, he wasn't here, the voice suave, nameless accent which was really absence of recognizable accent, "I said have you ever been to the castle?"

She gasped, hand to mouth, fear or just shock: but he ignored her, ignored even it seemed any possible response she might make to his question, not really taken in anyway out of this doze she had been dragged from, this safety of warm blackness so suddenly lost.

The German's eyes were fixed on his sister emerging all petulant gold, some mutter of gutturals and hair thrown back in a shower of droplets, out of the water: and, just as Mariella tried to frame herself, started to say . . . "I don't know . . . do you mean . . ." he suddenly reached in his trunks and before she could even think or protest, pulled out a bulky skin-diving knife and drove it quivering into the sand hilt-deep only inches from her outstretched hand that seemed to go before her not yet-shaped words like a messenger.

So that was what the bulge in his trunks had been . . . horrid the sudden disappointment she felt, and then she tried desperately to recover her social manners. His face was knotted, gaze fixed on the knife, interest in her apparently completely gone, sister now out of sight behind rocks. "No, no we kept meaning to climb up there, if you mean the castle up

there behind Gradina, but we haven't had time, and besides it's so hot for such a climb, isn't it?"

Don't talk so much, too much, Colin always says you do that, you know you do: scurry of thought in Mariella. The German didn't seem to have heard at all.

Then his eye turned on her again, hawk stooping just as her heart had stopped accelerating and she was almost calm again, licensed watcher equally contemptuous of film stars godlike letting themselves be watched, and screeching adulation of fans watching: "So you have not been?" His voice far away and yet too close, like the echo effects you could get from the headland over there, where if you shouted at the right spot among rocks and clouded-blue butterflies and spiky growth, your voice resounded round all the alleys of the town piled up the hill and down their reflection into the bay like some sunken Avalon of Arthur's spoiled for her though by Colin's twittering and juggling trying to get it all in one photograph.

She shook her head uncertainly as if first off she'd planned a nod: and he looked over at his sister, "We're going . . . we've got to go, haven't we, Heidi, to make what must be right." There was no question in his voice: the girl, dressed now in toweling suit denim-colored, sneered at him and went on scribbling in her diary as if taking notes on what was said for some future trial:

But she did not contradict—and Mariella guessed, though unsurely, that her sneer was defiance to cover fear, perhaps not of her brother so much, but of something connected with him and his plans that loomed like a loop of Hammer Films fog, lasso about to snatch them all out of baking living daylight into some dark, some fear: and tried mentally to shake herself and get a grip, being fanciful like this was so unlike her usual self . . . licensed to be an audience, that was her role in this, no more, it didn't involve her . . . And the cripple said, "You will come too . . . you deserve it."

Mariella meant to ask what he meant, or refuse so oddly and rudely worded an invitation . . . do something to assert her will . . .

Stupidly the thought of such a journey terrified and attracted her both, like childhood scrumping in an evil-looking old man's garden, when what would happen if you were caught was subject of shapeless rumor, terrifying incomprehensible yet pleasurable as wetting yourself, involving sheds and hands and no one really knew what happened then . . .

No answer seemed to be necessary, which she was grateful for, feeling as weak as just after childbirth . . . "Heidi will get our packed lunches from the hotel."

Sulkily the girl, without showing any sign of having heard, closed her black book, snapped top decisively on pen, got up, collected her things, walked up the steps toward the terrace.

The hills, layer on layer, were blue torch paper over the water.

No answer or advice there. No Colin to say yes or no: If he were here and said "No" at least she'd have something to fight against, some way to sharpen her mind on opposition and so achieve decision.

The German ignored her now, leant back, offered a cigarette without a word, asked her for a light; but all as if in the presence of a mirror merely or a ghost, causing no ripple on his self-absorption.

She realized the horrible thing was that the German fascinated her because in so many ways he seemed just like a younger Colin.

She tried to take her mind off what was happening, peering at the freighter nearest to them, where some kind of loading of the blood-red alumina seemed finally to have begun. But it was just another toy, unreal, no clue to pattern, and even the reminder it gave her of her kids playing with boats in the bath merely made her feel guilty, obscurely dirty, as if she'd betrayed them in some way, so that her mind shied off that with relief back into blankness.

Shout from the corner of the hotel by the chapel: a cry wordless as a gull's.

"All is ready. Time to go."

The German rose, favoring his leg: Mariella had felt a brief impulse to help him to his feet, like an injured child with knee in plaster: but was glad she had resisted. The thought of his face full of wrath at such a liberty was more than she could bear.

She followed obedient as an Indian wife as he walked up the baking path.

He turned once he was in the shade, "Your clothes, where are they? It will be all thorns there, you cannot walk like that."

Guiltily, upset as when teacher'd caught her out with unwashed knickers one day when, having no gymslip clean, she stripped to them for PT, she rushed back, put blouse top and summer trousers back on, then gathered her oddments, and, to assert independence, took them the long way round to leave at reception, shouting "Just a minute" to the two Germans who stood under the tree like hungry statues waiting for the meal that would let them breathe.

As soon as she was level with them they started to walk: for an instant she was left to tag behind like an unwanted playmate, not knowing whether to run and catch up or keep walking that step or two behind, feeling foolish.

Neither said anything.

She got the impression that Heidi resented her having been invited along: she walked along with a masked, unbetraying expression: but the lips seemed narrower than their usual sulky-sultry fullness, as if compressed together.

She showed no signs of walking slow to allow for her brother's limp, so Mariella, for the first time conscious of him as a cripple in that sense, rather than being merely someone powerful and fierce with an unusual badge of his nature, a driven leg for a lame king, daren't slow her steps either.

She was alongside them now, trying to match their pace exactly, as if in some unexplained way she'd be accepted if she did.

They passed the first houses of Gradina to the left, as the loop of road became the wider cobbled space, half square except it ran the full length of the town, curving along the bay, half dockside or harbor wall, boats and nets everywhere.

Mariella wanted to find some thing to say to the Germans, some comment to make on place or people, but every fragment of thought that crossed her mind seemed utterly banal. And anyway absence of conversation didn't seem to bother them at all: they would never feel forced to make conversation if stuck with a stranger in a train compartment, she thought, and wished she knew the cripple's name: but it would seem so idiotic to ask.

And all along the waterfront, and right round the loop of road climbing back opposite to the headland that looked over to the hotel, her mind was far away from the mechanical actions of walking, and the scene all around her, worrying away at why she had so easily, submissively, agreed to come along with them at the slightest word of asking. It made no sense in terms of the person she thought she was, none.

A light rain started, the sky gray and lowering now, as they climbed: the town round the harbor seeming slummy, threatening, a piece of home again.

She pulled the lightweight anorak out of her bag and put it on, getting the sleeves tangled as she hurried to keep up on the rough stones as Heidi and her brother still without a word turned off the main road just at the point where the sign illustrated falling rocks and steep gradient, and Mariella would have liked to stop and look down at the hotel, partly to get her breath back, and partly just because the hotel somehow now seemed a place of safety and familiarity.

The track the others moved up smoothly as water going uphill was

overhung by brambles and branches of what looked like, but probably wasn't, mountain ash and elder trees.

It turned and twisted as it climbed: the harbor hid like a teasing child in ambush, more fragments seen through the branches.

The rain grew steadily heavier, warm and wet and horrible like a rich man's hand, thought Mariella—and then tried to chide herself: her imagination out of control again, and those two diminishing up the path ahead of her agile as mountain goats.

She wanted to cry out, "Stop, wait for me," but her pride was hurt enough that she couldn't keep up even with a cripple, without being childish like that—or so she thought.

To her disgust her voice spoke against her will, "Can't we shelter till it stops?"

Heidi turned and smiled: it was like spittle in the face. Mariella scrambled on.

Just when she thought she'd collapse, they came onto flat ground: and, past some wild thistles, even onto a road, stony but still well-made.

"The road to the cemetery?"

"Of course," Heidi's answer to her brother: it was as if they spoke English only to annoy Mariella, since nothing they said seemed to be directed at her, excluding her totally . . . and then she realized that anyway those were the first words said since they'd left the hotel.

To the left, the road they had joined dived away into a watery grayness like old war naval films on the telly: there, Mariella thought, it must somehow curve back down to Gradina, perhaps the way the mysterious bus came she'd seen once or twice on the holiday, that no one ever seemed to get on or get off.

Perhaps it went to the dusty square where the market was, or the even more dried up walled off riverbed where the local kids played football with fishing nets for goals and Colin's guidebook said had been the Naval Arsenal in the times when Gradina was a great harbor . . . and cursed the little boys for disrespect in where they chose to play, when Mariella loved their ragged happiness, and tried to encourage her kids to go closer and perhaps get asked to join the game, till Colin harshly stopped her.

To the right, the road curved away over a steep scrubland: the two Germans set off up it without a backward glance, leaving Mariella behind as, hoping against hope for a brief break, she juggled with her bag that already cut deep into her shoulder with its strap.

Bag flopping, only half held on retightened buckle, she ran to catch up.

Oh this is ridiculous, she thought. She grabbed at Heidi's shoulder. The girl squirmed away as Mariella said, "What do they call your brother, then?"

"I thought you must be old friends."

A fellow woman, how could she be so horrible: surely they could have had such nice gossips together about all the other guests in the hotel, if they had only met earlier.

"No, seriously."

"Emico, after the great Emicoof Leininger, you must know of him, surely, the famous medieval Jew-killer."

Mariella fell back, feeling as if she had been slapped for nothing. Bloody Germans: she wished they'd all been killed in the war . . . Go back, that'd be the best thing, leave the horrible pair to it, that was what she ought to do.

Just say a cheery fairwell and run back down the road. In three-quarters of an hour, less maybe, she could be back in the hotel, safe from the rain, having a drink and reading her Maigret, at peace with everything.

In a minute from now she'd do it, a minute, turn back:

Oh look, her watch had stopped . . . somehow she was grateful for the excuse to delay, knowing pride'd never let her change her mind once she turned back on them. Somehow, today *must* make up for the failure all the rest of the holiday had been. Something must happen, something that would change everything.

Only why were they so horrible to her, why?

Suddenly she was grateful to the rain as to a surprise present, for it hid her tears.

Presently, trudging along after them, she decided to assert herself. She must, she must!

All along the roadside now curious blue-green thorn bushes, almost like Christmas trees flattened by hammers, anything from six inches to ten feet tall, and spiky, so spiky. She pressed alongside Emico; pointed at one, ran over and touched it till it scratched like a cat's kiss, strangely familiar even in its newness, "What is it? What are they?"

"You would not understand our name for them. In your tongue, Jerusalem Thorn."

"Why?"

"In the story, the Romans used them to crucify women who asked too many questions."

Heidi laughed, a harsh dry laugh like desert wind.

Mariella shrank back into herself, hunched into the rain as small as



she could, wishing really it would lash down and make her blind or unconscious, anything to end her humiliation and embarrassment.

The road curved on uphill. Now there was nothing to fasten the eye to: the sea and Gradina invisible, only rolling slopes of Jerusalem Thorn, occasional trees looming huge among such featurelessness.

A roar, and out of the murk a blue and white bus hurtled by: they had a glimpse of it coming straight at them. Mariella leapt into the brush, scratching her legs. Emico and Heidi stood stock still, glaring at the scruffy, rain-blurred driver with contempt. Somehow it swerved and missed them. The only contents were three shapeless black lumps at the back, old women, doubtless, and something white beside them that could have been a bundle of chickens or a goat. Yet despite her fright, Mariella could have cried with relief at seeing something human. She kept her face straight, feeling an inch high to not have stuck it out like the others. They said nothing.

A curve, a small horizon.

Over it, a white wall, a small white building with brown roof, looking a little like an electricity sub-station. Around it, white stiff figures as if a frozen picnic of nudists. Two cypresses sheltered the space on the side where the sea must be: the cemetery.

Still no human word from the two Germans.

More apparently unending slope. Another small horizon.

A dip: and far ahead, a cluster of houses half-hidden in trees, and across the next ridge a line of telephone poles or similar, marching to and from the village, whatever it was.

Mariella hoped they'd pass through it. Even unfriendly natives'd be better than this endless silent trudge with people who obviously hated her, walking stiffly on either side of her now like guards: and perhaps, perhaps, there'd be a cafe where she could stop and have a drink of lemonade, or beer even if in a place like this they let women drink. She'd even spend the little money she had left on a taxi, just to get away from Gradina.

From the village, a dog barked. Another joined in from a far patch of twisted trees to the left, another equally far off from a third cluster to the right. The rain had eased to a nasty wet-clamminess, like the feel of neck and back and underpits when she woke from an awful cold sweat nightmare: and of course always Colin slept through pig-comfortable in his own pit, the hollow nest well away from any contact with her that he always made of his half of the bed.

And suddenly, the other two turned off, turning her with them like a hinge with a door, onto a dried up path through the thorn that angled

off three-quarterwise into the thorn tangle. Which once entered, was nowhere dense as it looked.

She tried to strengthen herself to say, "This is far enough for me: I'm turning back now. Goodbye." But the words wouldn't come. Her feet seemed to have a life of their own, torpid, painful, yet strong enough to overcome her conscious intelligence completely.

They passed a half-built bungalow, square air-hole pierced blocks of cement rising like a deserted gun-emplacment from old war.

Somehow, some geese had climbed onto the uncompleted roof, and gabbed ferociously from there.

Otherwise, the landscape seemed deserted. Even the road seemed miles away now, and the telegraph poles were hidden by a swell of ground. The thorns grew higher, and the last roof was out of sight.

To the right, the land fell away, but she could not even see the inland sea that at least would have given her thoughts a guide to something familiar, the hotel's whereabouts.

The far mountains of the coastal range were hidden in the gray drizzle.

"Is this the shortest way to the castle?" She could keep silent no longer. The landscape was as cold and unwelcoming as home in late autumn November misery: she could not truly believe they were on the latitude of Florence, it all seemed a huge trick of Colin and the tour company and these Germans combined, to leave her, Mariella, helpless and miserable. For a minute she genuinely believed Colin had planned this all along, to leave her to the mercy of these Germans, and had she not asked to stay today, would have thought of some excuse to make her.

Neither German answered. She felt even more like a snubbed child.

Through the thorn toward them came a jangling, a harsh calling, somewhere between scream and guffaw.

She was terrified.

The violent beating of her heart did not stop even when several stout women appeared, two in the familiar black, one, kerchiefed, in a blue dress with gold and red embroidery.

They chased, sticks in hand, after a black, vile-looking donkey that charged wildly through the brush, braying, haw hawing, insane with excitement, legs kicking like a chorus girl on pep pills. To its back clung a child and a pair of panniers—full of wood: all strapped on.

Mariella came out with her laboriously learned word for good day, "Jindobry." The women muttered something, rushing past. The Germans ignored them.

Mariella was sure, as one woman stopped to stare, the kerchiefed one,

and Mariella looked back as if to implore help, wordlessly, that the woman gestured to her a warning, "Go back."

"I wish I dare," she muttered. Emico turned, looked at the woman. She made another gesture, this time two spread fingers of the left hand . . . Mariella thought, "It can't be *that* rudeness, not a woman . . ." and half remembered something similar they'd shown on the telly against the Evil Eye.

Then she was gone into the dry scrub and tangled bushes, some nameless mixture of gorse and broom and bramble, where the others had vanished in their fixed voiceless change. Soon even the donkey's cackling was inaudible.

More spiny bushes, more wind-twisted brush and bent-back gorse: the path winding, splitting sometimes like a river delta, joining and rejoining. Trees to the left, well-ahead, coming nearer and nearer: dry and small and oaklike. They came nearer, merged into a windbreak looming above a wall. The path followed them, then passed through at a jagged gap, went on between innumerable low walls of small stones piled together, and dry thorns wedged into barricades, creating a maze of tiny fields, some with stunted grapes in, knee high, hung with gray-purple bunches, diseased somehow in appearance, the vine-leaves a strange turquoise deep blue-green.

To the right a flattened conical hill loomed, bare save for scrub to the summit. Mariella was sure she'd seen nothing like that from the hotel window: yet their window opened in what must be this direction.

The fields became more varied: no bigger than a carpet, some, the biggest the size of a small terraced street, narrow and interlocked like a complex but boring jigsaw, they held such things as marrows, purplish cabbagelike plants, dried grass, something like broccoli, currantlike fruit bushes, all stunted, all mishappen.

Though the sea was still invisible, the wind that carried the moisture as the rain died, was salt, sealike yet not fresh.

The twisted trees closed about the road, if white stones scattered, bumped, crushed together, stabbing up at feet till Mariella felt as though she walked on glass, could be called road.

A tiny village rimmed round a widening of the road: low squalid whitewashed buildings. A huge black dog rushed out, barking violently: then a man in stained blue overall-like clothes, with beret and paradoxical modern dark glasses slouched from the door of an even squalider hut than most, decorated with a battered Coca-Cola sign, shouted the dog off: and as the Germans indifferently walked on, while Mariella

lingered terrified of the dog till it should obey him and clear her path, he gestured at her, gestures she was sure meant "go back, go back."

She wished she could explain to him that she was equally terrified of going back alone, of showing herself up: that everything about this day had become one mass of fear in which staying close to the Germans, despite their so blatantly expressed contempt, their sneering silence, was at least the lesser of possible evils.

When she walked forward across the barren shapeless square to catch up with the others disappearing between fresh trees farther ahead, he shrugged, dived back with the dog into the squalid bar or whatever it was: from the corner of her eye she saw telephone or electric wires plunge to it from emptiness. Here too where no car could come they must have "On the Buses." It comforted her a little.

As she ran to catch up she sensed rather than saw other figures gather round the door behind, to watch: their voices seemed to carry a gleeful regret, a "told you so" flavor.

She wished she was back at the hotel, laid on the beach waiting for Colin. She wished she'd never seen or even dreamed of this horrid hinterland, that she could never even explain to any friend or relative, those who expected only to have to see pictures with famous beauty spots on, or have to listen to how dear English beer was in the hotel. To try to explain how horrible *this* was back home, would be to push their tolerance, their family tolerance in which every member undertook to allow himself to be bored by the others so he too could have his turn to bore, too far.

The road, track, more a path to walk on single file now, went on between stone banks and blackberry hedges with the fruit overlarge, overripe, over-touched by flies laying belated eggs.

The odd artificial looking hill was ahead, then to the right, then behind.

The path began to climb slowly toward a ridge ahead, thick in trees.

The little fields continued, more and more of them now overground with thistle, thorn, wild grass and other weeds. Those still cultivated were now mostly grape, and even between the grandmother-bent blue-purple-grape-cluster carrying vines here weeds grew, and the supporting wires were rusted, tangled.

The rain had stopped: the sky was heavy with vast dark clouds, but that odd hill was lit by a luridly-clear light, and ahead the ridge was silhouetted against a painful brightness that must lie over the Adriatic.

A small cracked horse-trough-cum-fountain, with blurred inscription.

It had flooded, or the spring that fed it had, and the path dived here

into a muddy spreading pond a few hundred yards wide, filling the last hollow before the way climbed toward the ridge.

"This way," Emico that, his first words in miles. Heidi silent, merely sneered back at Mariella as if to say "you won't make it." Mariella determined nothing would make her admit defeat before that bitch, that cow.

Emico led the scramble up a steep bank to the right: a painful hop-skip-jump through—over blackthorn and wire tangle: a scabble through abandoned rotting cabbages where oddly the ground felt as heavy, cloggy, marshy as English clay in a boggy field.

Another wire to bend and clamber under, feeling it catch and rip the anorak that was the only new thing bought for this holiday.

Another grape patch, the most derelict looking yet.

"If no one wants them, do you think I could take some?" Mariella, hunger, thirst, greed to be noticeable at least, if not noticed. Emico turned, lip twisting, "It is up to you."

Bastard, she thought . . . and hated herself even more for asking. With beating heart, eyes swiveling round for some hidden shotgun-carrying farmer watching just waiting to spring out, she pulled clumsily a couple of huge bunches of the tiny grapes, black from this close up, the weight of their abandoned richness tugging them nearly into the red clamminess of the soil.

A loud noise made her jump violently.

Heidi laughed contemptuously. Mariella followed her finger's arrogant motion. Only an old white horse drinking from the muddy pond.

They were making their way along the edge of a sunken dry ditch, overgrown by brambles from the hedge that rimmed the road, and a small wood as wild yet artificial looking as something from a school version of "Midsummer's Eve," when the rain began again full force. In seconds everything was blotted out. A crow or starling or some such black bird squawked past to dive into the hedge.

Butterflies fluttered into the tangle.

"Can we shelter, please? It's so wet." Mariella against her will couldn't help leaving them yet another opening for scorn.

The cripple nodded. "We would not wish our little guest to drown." Almost human his voice then.

But by the time Mariella had arranged herself under an overhang of some thick hazelnutlike bush, clear of the heavy drips already beginning at its outer fringes, bag under her to give a dry sitting-space, hoping against hope there were no ants, she realized she had ended up not next to him but to his sister, with Emico beyond her.

They sat in silence for a while.

Then the girl pressed Mariella's shoulder with a sharp oddly jagged nail, almost as painful as the rock she had realized was beneath her leg, hidden in grass, and that by its very intensity of discomfort immunized her against everything, or almost everything at least.

Mariella looked round.

This close up the sense of heat, of warm colors, of power to eat life whenever it came in reach of those glittering white teeth, was all but overwhelming.

"Yes?"

"Do you want my brother?"

Mariella couldn't think what if anything to say, so she said nothing, merely looking attentive. It had got her through school, courtship, marriage, almost unhurt, this technique, perhaps it would save her now.

"Because if you want him I will ask him for you, he might let you . . . it would be good for him, he is under much strain, he needs to relax before what we must do."

The rain was a wall in front of them, inches away, making all the rest of the world a wet wilderness. Here, this dry burrow was like something in a dream, all normal connections, family, husband, children, were beyond reach as far as a star. Mariella realized abruptly just how badly she did want the cripple to plunge into her, rip her, wipe out years of being a good girl, a good daughter, good wife, good mother.

But she wouldn't, couldn't, ask for favors. Let him ask himself, not have this horrible sister, this hellcat pimp for him as casually and indifferently as if she was asking fishheads for a cat.

"He could ask me himself."

The girl nodded, as if that was what she expected: a chance to serve a god and of course such a foolish, useless creature set conditions, in effect ruined the chance to be of dumb, obedient service down. Typical human scum.

That at least was what Mariella read in her face.

And sat hugging her knees in dumb misery, wondering if she'd thrown everything away.

But he could've asked her himself, couldn't he. And at least asked his sister to go away for a bit. Did they really expect her to make love to him here in this horrid ditch like a new grave, all wet earth, and with that creature watching and doubtless taking notes in her black book? They must be inhuman, must be. Only he was so lovely, so powerful, and so sad.

But the rain stopped seconds after Heidi turned away indifferently

from her. The rain stopped, and a shaft of sun briefly lit the clearing before them, throwing the wood's darkness into greater contrast. And Emico got up, stiffly so that suddenly Mariella as well as fear and anger and longing felt pity.

And stumped away.

Not in the whole time had the Germans looked at a map.

Yet now even that odd-shaped hill was lost from view in the swells of land, and the sea, and as the clouds closed again so too was the sun.

There were no landmarks, yet without hesitation Emico, after leading them down a bank of earth back onto the familiar path, round the next bend led them off it into the woodland.

Over a curiously short smooth sward like a dance-floor thrown down in the wilderness.

On through trees bent before some wind. At first they were full height, but their tops must be flattened by the prevailing ridge, she realized after a time, so that as they climbed the slope between these twisted trunks, the roof over their heads, the roof of matted branches and leaves, grew nearer and nearer, and the trees among which they climbed, shorter and shorter.

Till suddenly the roof came down to meet them, an impenetrable tangle of branches, or so it seemed.

But Emico vanished through it, then Heidi.

And Mariella, pushing forward, found a tiny opening, a goat's exit perhaps: just as her hair tangled among some branches behind.

A knife flashed before her eyes. She was terrified, thinking, "this is it, they've brought me here to kill me, sex fiends, that's what they are, German murderers, it'll be in the 'News of the World'."

And was trying to gather breath against the yawn-thickening lump in her throat of utter terror, the knife and hand made more frightening because she could not see the body to which it belonged, when it passed by her head and smoothly, neatly, trimmed the end of her hair: she felt a brief tug at the roots, a tiny pain.

And was free and scrambling out onto the ridge, cursing her foolishness.

To see Emico and Heidi staring indifferently away from her, looking upward and onward, facing forward. "Thank you." Ignored, as if help had never been given her to get free. She turned to look back from where they had come, to cover her embarrassment.

And gasped in wonder.

The wood lay before her like a floor, as if she could walk away on it, from the yard-high or smaller dwarf oaks at her feet to the farthest giants.

Beyond, the maze of tiny misshapen fields, the shapes and colors of germs and leucocytes in school biology.

That odd bunker-shaped hill, dwarfed now to a skull's hat in a Western.

And the sea back again, old friend, a gray oily pond stretching far off to the rusty patches of alumina quarry and black specks of freighters. And, far to the right, the roofs of Gradina and even, if she strained her eyes, what she was sure was the hotel. And the pile on pile of coastal mountains, no longer torch paper blue, a bleached gray now beneath the blackened gray of sky, bone displayed on black velvet like jewels she wished Colin would buy her but he never did, not that they could afford, but at least sometime couldn't he say he wished he could buy her just some small diamond?

Behind her, the very faintest sound of impatience.

She turned, but both still had their backs to her: there was no knowing which it was.

And the impact was like a physical blow of what she saw: gravity seemed to turn and spin dizzily so that the wild scurry of clouds she looked up at was like a chasm into which she wished to fall, a waterfall round the central lure.

The castle, that some blindness had not let her see, shock of that knife just past perhaps, loomed vast overhead, seeming about to topple on her, seize her throat, so huge it piled above.

She covered her eyes a second, then looked again. Perspectives steadied.

In fact it must be a good quarter of a mile away: beyond another dip full of wild rocks and brush and even a few olives and pines, it piled hugely up on top of a savage face of cliffs, on which it in turn added a fantastic complex of towers and pinnacles. Where from far back at the hotel it had looked tiny, tame, more blockhouse than anything else, and appearing to be on quite low hills, she realized now all this was entirely trick of distance and the intervening layers of ridges. This was something huge.

"Originally built as the Monastery of the Holy Tooth and the Holy Thorn, both believed to have been brought here by the Virgin Mary during her flight from the revenge of Rome . . . pilgrims believed that here they would if worthy receive not just their heart's desire, but Heaven's purest interpretation of it . . . and this belief, which persisted even after the monastery became a fortress of a succession of peoples, was one reason for the ferocity of its defense against the Turks. Jankovic Kula was the hero of the siege, one of the greatest generals of the Croat



resistance, pirate more than servant of any king, and his victory here was one of the turning points stopping the Turkish advance, as important in its way as the successful defenses of Malta or Vienna.”

Emico looked at neither of them as he said this, his eye instead fixed on the silhouetted, hard-to-clearly-define collar of towers like a thunder-lizard's ruff she'd once seen in a zoo, chest puffed out and hissing, vast round the huge central tower.

He sounded so like Colin in one way, reeling out his unwanted information: yet somehow with him it was painfully moving, made her want to clutch him like a child and rub him better, kiss him better, as if his knowledge all sprang from an unhealed wound. And the tentaclelike white crippled arm seemed to rise and point at the building's vastness over there against his will, as a plant turns toward the sun.

Mariella could not keep silent. “Your heart's desire,” she stammered it out, nearly drying up under Heidi's baleful glare turned on her now.

Emico answered in a tone more natural than anything else she'd yet heard him say, “Your heart's desire, yes: but your true heart's desire, what you may not even know you want, not what you think you want, or your reason does . . . that is the legend, anyway.” His voice died away to boredom with the last words, and he stumped away among the bushes, aiming toward those colossal foundations soaring above them.

They followed him as he moved into the growth of bush: the sky seemed full of those vast walls ahead, and for the last few minutes of the walk, like the last few minutes before going into the headmaster's study at school when she'd been reported for cheating which she had not done but was too shy to deny, and knew beforehand she would be too shy to deny, so that she knew in advance she'd be punished for something she had not done, only because it was a friend of hers who'd really cheated, who was a teacher's pet, and the teacher, Birdie they called him because his name was Wren, bespectacled and scared looking and, so older girls said, stood so often at the stairbottom so he could look up skirts, hated Mariella particularly because once when in an R.I. class he'd asked who didn't believe in God and Mariella not knowing one way or the other had been the only one to put her hand up, just because her father said he was an atheist, being an ex shop-steward sacked for agitating, and she feeling loyal, and ever since Birdie had hated her, jeering her as “The Godless One” in front of all the class, like these last few minutes of movement seemed somehow at one and the same time the terrible end of everything and also a liberation, because somehow she was sure, just from fear of being anything else, she was going to be no matter what the crunch true to herself.

The gate was an anti-climax.

The slope had risen imperceptibly: almost down on hands and knees to scramble over butter and egg plants and tiny blue flowers and past dry growths on which butterflies hung like eyes, they looked up only at the last minute before crashing headlong into it.

The tower was incredibly smooth, the stones as close-joined as if they were plastic. The mellowing of lichen and creeper seemed irrelevant, like lipstick on an old woman. The gob of gate itself was vast and blackened wood bound by huge iron bonds, hinges and keyholes and chains in profusion like Houdini costume exaggerated for a TV show.

Emico grasped the vast handle of the door, itself four times a man's height.

The door clanged, but did not give.

Emico seemed human as in temper he bashed and crashed at it.

Mariella realized that, horrible as these people were, these so alluring, so vile Germans, they were still infinitely better than being here alone. Yet paradoxically she could not help believing, somewhere at the back of her mind, that had she been here alone somehow the door would have magically opened for her: that she would have got in where they could not.

There was some muttering in German between Emico and Heidi, with glances at the smooth sweep of stonework up to just-visible battered battlements. They must have seen it as hopeless.

Emico started along the wall's foot to the right, forcing his way through prickly growth with exaggerated motions of obviously restrained fury. For the first time Mariella pitied him, despite her determination not to be affected by his crippledom.

He vanished from sight.

Heidi sneered at Mariella, as if to say "You wait there, useless, you'd only be in the way", then dived after him into the tangle that grew right to the masonry's foot.

Mariella sat down: emptied a stone from her shoe that had hurt for ages but she'd felt too embarrassed to touch. Then climbed behind a growth of spiny dry branches, and let herself piss.

And finally, just for luck, gave one last bang on the great door that seemed to belong not in the real world but in a fairy tale of dungeons to frighten children.

Echo, echo of resounding noise.

Silence enough for the dust a lizard stirred to fall with a scrabbling noise among the roots of the brush.

And then, far off within, a sound of movement. A bell, seeming, and

then a clank drag as if of huge metal feet. Terrifying: except that Mariella was so pleased to have succeeded where Emico had failed, she would have welcomed even the King of Hell to prove her point.

Silence, till she thought her ears had gone back on her, and the sounds had been an illusion.

Far up above the walls a jet fighter slipped lazily westward toward the sea, its modernity seeming as irrelevant to where and when they were as a stoat at a pet rabbit show—when all the rabbits too had nice sharp teeth.

While Mariella's eyes were still following it flying so free in air, and wishing she could escape somehow somewhere up where no one could reach or pressure, there was a sharp sound like a pistol shot right in front of her.

She sprung round, startled, her foot dislodging a trail of small pebbles that clattered away down the slope, setting a brief hush to the cicada chorus, while one of them, brilliant red its wings, so neatly hidden when they sit, so huge and phosphorescent when they fly, flittered past before her face, a second shock.

So that she had only half recovered when she saw an eye peering out at her from what seemed to be the solid fastness of the great door: and screamed.

A funny wheedling voice, at the same time bubbling and effeminate, like a choked spring, came at her, and suddenly a section of the gate wheezed outwards. She jumped back realizing suddenly that what she'd seen was first a small judas-eye grating opening, and then a kind of wicket gate, its hinges rusted near solid.

"Like Alice in Wonderland" she thought, and felt oddly safe again.

And the man who appeared, beckoning and gesturing in a way that seemed paradoxically at one and the same time to fend her off and urge her in, was not frightening either. Misshapen yes, bent sideways by some deformity. Frightening, no.

Perhaps it was the huge grin. Tooth-filled, brown, but so shaped into a permanent smile the mouth that no one could resist it unless he hated laughter itself. And the eyes, blue and clear as a rainwashed sky amidst a face so wrinkled, tanned, dirt and berry and scratch stained it could have been an old map of mountains better than a human visage, were absolutely guileless.

The rest of him, in shapeless denim and torn, smoke-blackened leather flying jacket, crumpled beret with oddly Scottish pom-pom crammed down over greasy black and gray ladder-streaked curls, his body twisted across the gap of the little wicket-gate like a spoon bent in careless hands,

and round the heels a dog, black and border collieish, leaping and lolloping and barking in idiot joy at the excitement of a visitor, seemed all of a piece with the image of a toy broken clumsily but still trying to perform its amusing tricks with all the fragmentary life left in the clockwork.

The man's gibberish was incomprehensible, slavering and bubbling, odd squeaks and almost-soprano waverings ending his question-shaped phrasings, even had she spoken Croatian.

She tried, hard, not to laugh at him: after all, you shouldn't laugh at the afflicted, and anyway he was so likeable-looking, and, a warning voice from childhood "Don't talk to strangers" talks at schools cried, the childish-seeming are often the most dangerous with their sudden grasping sweaty hands that really only want to play but break what they play with, clumsily and without intent. But the laughter burst out, all the same, almost hysterical. Partly relief, perhaps, that the Germans seemed to have definitely vanished. Even the sound of movement through the bushes distantly round the curve of wall was now inaudible.

The man laughed too, a weird yet not unpleasing peeling trill.

"Can I come in?" speaking very slowly, pointing and gesturing as in dumb talk: Mariella's efforts produced no enlightenment, only more laughter. The dog slipped past his legs and leapt up, licking, at her. She held it off, half embrace, half blow, and tried again, pointing at herself, then the gate, then the man, pantomiming movement forward with her feet. A few drops of rain splattered, and then, as if that had been last curtain, the sun suddenly burst through the black heavy clouds, falling straight in her face almost blinding, so that wall and man and dog still leaping up all became silhouettes against its brightness.

The man must've understood: he stepped back, swinging the wicket aside, whistling the dog clear, so that she had room to pass.

She felt a vast sense of triumph that she'd got a step ahead of the Germans, got in first, a kid's one-upmanship, gloriously complete, the more so that she had no one to show off to.

Past the gate, she looked round in delight at a tangled garden, a hidden place almost become miniature forest with the growth of trees she knew she must've learned about at school but couldn't recognize, some like cypresses, some oakshape, some feather-dustery firs so that all the air was stirred by their slight movement.

She looked back at the gate, meaning to persuade the man to leave it open for Heidi and Emico to get in. But already, whistling, he'd locked the wicket with a huge rusty key, one of a number on a ring that he carefully placed on a hook above, where slits in the arch's curve must

once have been, Mariella thought with a shiver of excitement, have been used once to pour down oil or drop portcullises on attackers.

It was just like being a child again. She wanted to run through the garden, try to find where this wall went, and the one that must lie ahead, visible in tantalizing glimpses through the treetops: or sing, or stand on her head. Reluctantly, she decided to be sensible.

She tried to indicate to the custodian, or whatever he was, village idiot without a village, to open the gate again.

All he did was point at himself, and mutter something that sounded like Stepan, and at the dog, and a further mutter that could have been anything but which she took as Bozo because that dog from her childhood had been Bozo: and then smiling he beckoned her forward, and she followed, trying to look in all directions at once.

A few yards on, and the path forked, round a huge broken fountain, one that must have lost its function centuries ago, since an even huger cactus-type thing, with serrated edge tongue-shaped leaves, grew in some odd way not round but through the cracked and broken rim, a patch of sun amidst the gloom in which lizards skittered like droplets of the long-ago water it had once held and danced with.

She peered at the plant, trying to remember what Colin had said it was called, carving his name through the leaf on one they'd seen like it on one of the excursions, till the plant's so armored-looking flesh seemed to bleed sap and she cringed with a borrowed and, she knew consciously, totally irrational pain with the thought of all through its growth the wounds of those irregular razor-cut gouged letters growing with it, unending scars just so Colin could leave his name behind.

As she turned away to follow the gesturing man and leaping dog, both urging her eagerly on, the name came back. Agave. She wished for an instant she were like that, tough and spiny and almost immortal: only then fools'd come and carve their names on her—and anyway she was in danger of turning into one of these silly sentimental middle-class women you got on telly dramas, who had nowt better to do than think about themselves and their ailments.

She moved faster to catch up with her guides, but the perfect place was a little spoiled.

Shadows seemed to swallow them, and as she came up to where they'd vanished, she realized why.

Two towers loomed to left and right, and between them the path passed into the gloom of a second great arch, recessed deeply: here the portcullis was still just visible, jammed and askew high up in the curvature.

Once into the tunnel, her eyes began to recover from the abrupt dive into darkness.

The arch-roofed passageway bent, and just as they reached the bend, low doors opened to left and right. Ahead, now, she could see sunlight in another inner courtyard, and for a second she thought she heard a clucking as of hens. The dog barked, and silence.

The guide seemed to be waiting for her to decide which way to go.

She moved toward the right-hand door, the heavy stone underfoot striking cold through the soles of her feet.

Something made the hair at her nape stiffen, a horrid low humming, like wind in far off telegraph wires, or bees in pinewoods.

Mariella looked up.

Dimly above her, in a niche like a saint-holder on a church wall, a carved marble bust stared down. Horrible, sightless; it took her an instant of staring, transfixed, to realize the vile quality of the stare came from the fact that the white eyes had no pupils. The face was metal-stern: the nose big, the curl of twin-forked beard jagged as if trimmed only occasionally and then with a sword: some sort of helmet was carved round, its deeper shadow and constriction emphasizing pools of dark like a skull's holes along high cheekbone line, and the pride, and at the same time oddly humorous cruelty, as if to remain straight faced for the sculptor.

The guide from behind whispered suddenly in her ear, so she jumped, something about "Ban . . . Turki . . ." and then a stumble of German, "Grosse Graf," Great Count, that she half-knew from one of Colin's many show-off lectures, and then something that sounded like "death" repeated, and gesturings with fingers as if he was doing the universal shopkeeper count for five, tens, fifties, hundreds, and "Turchken, krieg, grose krieg, hier", all half hidden in the gloom, misshapen as a spider's shadow, and then a sudden flash of teeth and wave of hands as if to convey how communication was helpless but at least they both meant well . . . and the buzzing or humming started again: she looked up then jumped back as a stick thrust past her.

The head fell sideways in its niche, and behind she had just time to see that its back was hollow and filled with a vast gray beard or cornucopia shaped hive or nest, when black shapes hurtled out in a cloud. A hand pulled her back and the cloud shot past into the garden, hornets they must be and vanished, still droning that horrid bagpipish noise.

She leant against the wall, gasping, palpitating.

Too much was happening, too fast.

The bust tottered in its niche. The guide leapt forward, and somehow

caught it one handed just as it all but reached the stone flags. As he held it up close for her to admire the horrid sightless eyes, she noticed chipped places on nose and ears: doubtless every visitor, if he ever got any other, was treated to the dislodging of hornets—and he confirmed her suspicion by somehow scrambling up the apparently glass smooth walls to replace the face in its niche where it glimmered down balefully, a patch of dead whiteness like the moon or an unwanted child.

She wanted to get back into the sunlight, and started to move toward the inner courtyard, wishing to get the visit over with and wishing too the Germans'd appear to protect her against any more shocks or at least diffuse their effect, make them more a shared traveler's tale than a sudden heartstopper for one.

But the guide pulled at her arm, into the little door on the opposite side of the passage.

They passed into a gloomy chamber, its few windows thick with dust, high and barred against the light.

Shapeless objects littered it, on walls and floor.

Peering about, she made out what seemed to be battleaxes, rusty swords, a suit of armor; on another wall things like the pikes the Beefeaters had, and then a 'snap' at her feet. She jumped back, wondering how much more her heart would take as she realized from the little guide's horrid, dry, almost hysterical laugh that it was some sort of mantrap he'd snapped shut just short of her foot by a hidden mechanism.

On through a further passage into another room.

More obscure, gloom hidden relics.

On a lectern, a huge Bible, chained up.

She opened it: faintly she could make out a wood engraving of a horridly realistic devil in whose mouth was swallowed all of what was either a woman or very effeminate man except the legs and buttocks, splayed out as if the agony was enjoyable.

In a corner, tilted against the wall, a kind of cart or open carriage, with huge long shafts.

Along one wall, furled on poles, what must once have been flags or banners, but were now merely muddy brown collections of moth holes: the least breeze, she thought, would make them fall to lacelike dust.

The guide stared at her beseechingly, like a pet wanting his ears scratched. Obliging, she peered closely at them trying to look awed, serious, as if in church.

It meant nothing to her. He seemed content. Colin, she knew, would have known just what it all meant.

She sneezed, violently: the cold and dampness was too much.

Another passage.

A room darker still, high-columned, where shapes lurched and made odd snuffling noises.

The guide pointed, banged on something, bounced on it. Laughed, and the dog barked as if with laughter.

Her eyes focusing at last. A kind of camp bed, but double size, filthy with a nestlike mass of straw mattress and sheets so black the noise must be them knocking to get out.

And all around in the gloom, curiously stained sheep, "piss color" she thought, and giggled hysterically.

The room receded vastly into the gloom: a banquet hall, perhaps.

Yet another passage, still following that will-o-the-wisp pair of figures, manlike guide and doglike guide.

Christ, the place must be vast. And why call on Christ, Colin always told her how idiotic it was, this superstitious falling back to childhood in any crisis.

Still, he wasn't here. Nor anyone else to protect her.

Light ahead. They must be nearly back at the courtyard. Thank God. This time she'd just make straight back through the gate, with profuse thanks, and money even, if the little man wouldn't be hurt, anything to get away from him, and here.

And within feet of the light and the smell of some strange flower and the jerky leap of a butterfly, a hand on her arm. The guide again, turning her toward the passage wall, a deeper dark.

A soft sound outside, was this a whisper of encouragement?

A trick of wind, probably, she could see a little swirl of dust out there.

A push at her back, some muttering she could not understand, and then, in what she knew was German but meant nothing. "Quelle, gross quelle, brunnen, tief, tief" still no clarity in her brain.

The hand in her back pushing her forward. Sheer darkness all round now, only a step or two into the hollow opening in the wall, but blackness absolute: underfoot, rough, hollowed, the very slightest declivity. A breath of cold, foul air.

And she stopped, grabbed outward. Hands on emptiness, then scrabbling backward onto walls. And a leap back.

The little guide's arm passed her, lighting a match, muttering, chattering, like a pansy interior decorator or a monkey.

And in the faint yet harsh flare of the match, emptiness dropping away at her feet beyond all sight, and a far wall, tormented twisted living rock.

Shivering, she threw a small coin from her purse, not even looking to



see what denomination it was. It bounced on the far wall, fell. And long, long afterward not even a loud splash, a splash tiny beyond belief.

She ran, frantic, toward the light, brushing mancreature and dog aside, her breath gasping, heaving, ripping her throat raw as if she'd run ten miles.

And a voice calm, posh, Queen's English as if the BBC from some Third Programme Tutorial, "Too bad—the due has not been paid after all. We must think of something else."

She halted her headlong run, tried to clear eyes blurred with tears of panic, blazed almost blind by the sudden light.

A few feet away across the courtyard stood the most unlikely person she could imagine there.

Middle-height, not fattish yet somehow implying corpulence . . . and the very first impression, so sharp it withstood even scrutiny of jarring detail, was of a British army officer from one of those "stiff upper lips, chaps, over the top now" wartime films. The little stiff tash, the red face, redness showing even under the weathered tan, the cropped fair hair, the stiffness of carriage and the vaguely tweedy vaguely patched clothes: even to black eye patch worn like monocle.

"Well, that's too bad, Carruthers of the F.O."

That same nervous impulse that had always made her speak out in class at school, speak out against her will with the dreadful pun, the cheeky remark, the comment any teacher took as rebellion and sneer. Yet never intended as that, some longing merely to be accepted whatever she did, reassured that she had a right to be there, to exist: even the reluctant laughter of schoolmates who hated her really for being too clever, the hurled blackboard eraser or chalk of goaded teacher who till then had unassailed held grip of class and now had to fight near hysteria of choked giggles by classmates, even these were better, these and the inevitable punishment, the dreadful wait for cane or letter to parents, than sitting in the class, silent, friendless, unknown.

And sometimes it had worked to exorcise her fears. The bully of a girl two classes higher, nailbitten, huge, hair cropped like a footballer, who'd attacked and terrified her rabbit-shivering so often on the way home.

And one time had started to tease her, set as monitor at their school dinner table.

Only this one time Mariella had turned, not brave, merely so embarrassed by her terror she had let her unconscious speak. "Get back in your cage, ape. I'll rattle your bars when I need you."

The gale of half-choked laughter this time had been armor.

The bigger girl had flinched as if hit in the stomach. Perhaps the

comparison had been her secret vision of herself and how the world saw her, the barrel chest and slightly hair chin and biceps.

She had never bothered her again.

And even, three years later, seen by Mariella one cold winter afternoon turning too quickly dark on the way home, the older girl already having left school and being, as far as anyone could learn, an ineffectual cinema usherette, had invited her, harsh yet pleading, to go into the bushes with her down Dobson Bank, saying she had some new rainbow-striped knickers she wanted to show Mariella.

But someone had called Mariella, "Hey, your dad's waiting with the car" and Mariella never saw her again.

The same impulse, to strike out with words when fear gets too much.

But this one, stood, fiftyish, even in his sixties perhaps, firm in his half-shadowed corner in the arch-colonnaded yard, dim as if night was where he was, even the sqawking scrabbling ducks and chickens staying well clear, such calm more like a whirlwind's vortex than any mere silence, he was something else again.

And before him stood, heads bent as supplicants, dressed for some reason now in rough black hooded robes, recognizable only by their feet, were the two Germans, stood like children pleading for a promised present, "Even though we have been bad, we didn't mean it and anyway it wasn't *our* fault," that message written in their every line even though she could not see their faces, nor in fact tear her eyes from his.

Slowly, slowly, as a snail laying its slime trail he spoke, indifferent as perfection, "What have we here? A clever girl? A clever, foolish girl? A girl who has not dared grow up? How sad she is, she makes us laugh."

The laugh was horrible, choked and phlegmy somehow as if coming out of decaying rotting creatures in a mine, and ending even more horribly because even less appropriately to the firm, upstanding, military-looking figure, in a high pitched girlish giggle.

The whole courtyard seemed to darken, as if blackness spilled from him and overflowed steadily everywhere.

Dog, guide, Germans, the very air were silent . . . waiting . . . as if a huge storm must break.

Mariella, crushed as if an attempt at praising someone humbly or offering a small tawdry but months-saved-for gift had been rebuffed, waited too.

The figure looked at the guide lurking in the archway.

Just a look, but the guide slithered away into the shadows like a dog that knows it has done wrong, and punishment must come, but still by sufficient cringing hopes to somehow against hope save itself, all the

while terror making the prospective punishment the more dreadful the more it is delayed.

The dog followed, snarling, panting, belly down, turning to cringe and show wide-mouthed defiance at one and the same time, a combination unreal as the schizophrenia of a hound trying at one and the same time to deter an intruder and play with a child, yet made horrible by the overall smell of fear in its very demeanor.

Both vanished into the passageway.

The figure looked the three foreigners over, as if inspecting cheap-jack rubbish on a marketstall.

Mariella found herself holding her breath—and, irrelevantly, longing for a smoke yet not daring to light one as if the match would somehow turn to lightning and consume her on the spot.

She wanted to ask Emico, “Who is he?” or ask direct, but dare not break the spell.

“You do not know who I am . . . I am the Master . . . that is all you need to know,” those words addressed directly to her.

Read in cold blood on a page she’d have thought them hysterically funny, such a claim, delivered so stiffly: not pompously, but with an utter certainty that was pomposity’s darker twin: would have reduced her to gales of mirth.

Here, and seeming to come straight from a penetration into her mind like cold rays from a lizard’s eye, or a hateful penetration of her body by Colin when she knew he merely wished to masturbate in her, hurried, perfunctory and thick-voiced in approach, it was overwhelming.

It seemed to blow open every door in her mind, leave all recesses open to the cold blast so that what the Master said next was imperishably written everywhere in her thoughts, all other concepts driven scurrying away before them like rats from a mill when the demolition men began their work.

“Yes, everything about you, in you, proves you do not really want to be changed into what you could be . . . you cannot, as these others wish and will, if we or those I speak for can agree a price, a due, shed your false self to be reborn and come true . . . there is *no* other you to be revealed, set free, because you are what you are already through and through . . .” Each word crashing into her senses, *true, true, true* . . .

“You are like a cracked cup waiting only always empty to be filled . . . and only can you be filled with dust, and then only when you become dust . . . you are so made one, so complete about the flaw to heal the flaw would only shatter you . . . you can be ruined, broken, but not healed . . .

“Now keep silence, speak no more till all is done . . . there is here now no other part for you but to be witness of what is to be, and to be done.”

And turned from her as if she no longer existed, weighed in the balance and wanting . . .

Her response half relief, that the hawk’s shadow had passed toward a fatter rabbit . . .

Half longing to shriek out, “But I exist too and do not want to . . . do to me what you must, destroy me, I *will* not be left out,” like a spoiled child when others are noticed, or, more precise, like the neglected child’s endless mute shape of long-ago stifled cry, as the favored brother and sister bask in the ray of parents’ attention, never guessing, the poor ignored one, that after all they too are frail and limits exist to the amount of attention they can spare from themselves and their own incompleteness, suffering, to offer any child, any stranger, interruptor, so prefer to offer one enough and one nothing than offer two meals each leading in their smallness only to malnutrition . . .

All these thoughts, these forgivenesses passed through her brain—and the thought, too, that the Master, beginning now the movements, passes, raisings of smokes and killings of doves that began his business, that He, surely, at least of all those she had ever met should be full to overflowing, should not lack nor need to ration, set limit, to his terrible affection, that He at least should have time and destruction to spare for everyone . . .

And then the changes that the proceedings were designed, it seemed, to breed, really began . . .

And her mind darkened . . . Her mouth filled with a longing to retch, like the evil green swill-taste of too much cheap local wine at the so-called tasting they had been taken to, one raw white, its newness a source of pride not shame, and thin lifeless ham, each forced on her in never ending stream while fellow passengers in their eighties tried to dance and sing and Colin shrieking, cursed her for spoiling the camera film by taking the film out “in daylight,” to see why it had jammed, which had seemed so natural to her at the time, and she had at last run out to be sick—and woken on the hotel bed thinking she was blind, only to find it was a power failure in the town . . .

And all the waiters seemed more sardonic than usual, a hidden well of laughter at these English who could not hold their liquor, who all had that evening picked at food and snarled among themselves, even the most ebullient silenced . . .

But even through Colin’s unending nit-picking about the spoiled film, raw in her mind had been that instant’s terror, the total blackness in which she’d stumbled to the sink to be sick again, no light on harbor or

over roofs or sky, only utter black, and the vast relief, stumbled to door and wrenching it open to scream, to see far down the corridor the flicker of a candle in one of the chambermaid's grasp, and know she had her sight, so that she could have kissed the woman.

Having of course no one to tell, afraid to show herself up to fellow tourists over such silly fear, old wives' tale, folk belief, that bad alcohol blinded you . . . and Colin too endlessly on about some amazing shot he'd reckoned he'd got of the whole town identically reflected upside down in the harbor, after hours waiting for perfect water conditions, stillness, tide, no boats, got up at dawn, too busy over this lamentation, enjoyed like most of his complaints, she was sure, as one more proof not just how she was the idiot, albatross, cross that held him back, the burden he must carry like Old Man of the Mountain on his back . . .

And all this merged . . . and was gone . . . and like a flashback the real memory of revelation came only, desperately fought off as if it had been memory of rape, as she came to herself running wildly like steeplechaser over low walls, hedges, brush, all scratched and skin raw and torn to shreds.

And shreds like the skin she passed off to him as from a fall, wishing almost instead they were wild lovebites of some winged, some clawing being . . . shreds too were the event, events, facts; legends, whatever they were, reshaping, shifting, twisting, as motes in eyes pressed onto a pillow seeking sleep or stopping tears . . .

Shreds that came went came . . . repeated . . . interlocked . . . randomly joined left conjoined again . . . like couples in some porno magazines she'd found once in her husband's private drawer at home, and looked at, sweating, legs heavy and faint as if up too fast in a lift . . . and never dared ask him about, knowing somehow he'd make her feel small over her curiosity, her ignorance of his schemes, ideas, intellect, plans, even such twistings as those of girls with girls, men with dogs, girls with goats, men with fatter men, would be part of his Plan, not mere vulgar gray-mac wanking pictures . . .

And the shreds left in her mind, the shreds of these events, mingled, blew in her mind all the way home, Home . . . like paper fragments twisting in the air above a bonfire went and came . . . went and came . . . the frame never clear and yet each fragment in its sharp as a knife as Time going by as children outgrowing her leaving only soil behind . . . "How could someone as big as you come out of someone as small as her?" one of the kids had asked once after they'd been to see her mother, their grandmother . . . somehow these memories too were much too large for

the soil in which they grew and came and spewed and could only be vomited disordered out, no table was large enough, no acreage of thought, to put them into tidy rows and make them into sense . . .

the evil green . . . the wine at the tasting the hotel staff arranged . . . white wine, yes but not white, raw, green, vomitous . . . the evil green of the thorned land she ran through . . . scrabbling, falling, ridden by fear as donkeys brayed contemptuous as if to say "Stop, wait, I'll come, I'll ride on you" . . . child piggyback on mother growing weight . . . thorns, thorns . . . the prophet seemed to talk of the moon being a suburb of Earth and computers, though god knew how he knew what they were, thinking machines, these would come adopt his prophecies, they were better learners than her . . . and she shrunk under the whiplash of his teaching words . . .

shall we leave, avoid, evade, hide, cover as a grain of sand by a pearl the real memory of revelation, cried her mind . . . shall we find the children, tell them a story, play with starfish till they break, haggle for grapes, buy a drink . . . shall we get postcards, get cigarettes, see what the price of meat or Coke or an ice-cream is like compared to home, since that is the first thing the wives around the neighborhood will ask when we get back, after they get over their awe at us not being imprisoned eaten beaten by the Communists . . . shall we forget snake skin of after shed, the brother whizzed down the well, his sister eaten, smooth silver silver of reptile, a river, a lightning flash of river . . . a revelation, shall we forget it echoing across the bay, over the sign showing graphically stones falling off cliffs and slope one in five, echoing through the little streets of the town up the hill across the bay, over the water like a thunder of terror till dogs bark everywhere and even old black widow women leading donkeys and men asleep under their boats turn to look and Mariella's mind realizes it is she who has cried, cried in relief scrabbling back onto the road at last after rock-fields, Jerusalem throne-thorn walls . . . relief and greater fear that road, water, town, castle, too will turn and rend her, even hotel he turned and changed, even her husband have doubled his head, split into horns, grown three legs . . . shouted and woke familiar echo in hope her own voice somehow thrown forward back around alleys town walls hills would exercise the half-remembered half-blurred terrors and then on knees by a fallen branch of fir tearing madly at a cyclamen rooted in the rock praying genuinely praying that no one knew the hollowing crying that still re-echoed among the streets was the cry of this "mad Englishwoman" herself and then even now pulling one by one stones away from the roots of the cyclamen, deeper deeper, tearing fingers, nails, spoiling her skin, determined madly age

on age to get the plant out safe still flowering take it home a token tho she had to go down a yard to release it . . . and at last did . . . and with it clutched in an upturned fold of her blouse, clutched like a child this plant, feeling safe at last, safe though battered weary almost sexually overdrawn as if from a hysterectomy how a neighbor described it once, like the results of a night with too many men, she ran on . . . ran on . . .

mind a blur of half-buried church carved into ground . . . of bar blind, eyeless, its only door barred by flies and crates of sticky bottles and jeering mumbling faces . . . of shaved-head children playing soldiers and poking at some mangily huge white cat with sticks like bayonets . . . of one tractor, once painted red, mumbling and grumbling like a beast among beasts . . . of useless fearful villagers crossing themselves against some evil eye, pointing fingers at her as she ran by, longing to tell somebody her news as if it was a lucky win in a lottery or a change of Prime Minister or outbreak of war, but knowing no one could, would ever understand her . . . not here . . . not anywhere . . . not even back at home where they thought they spoke her language and she thought she spoke theirs . . .

rain . . . light then busy then a constant scurrying . . . and small blue butterflies, clouded, zooming round her as she briefly disordered sheltered . . . horrible to have them here near her, like eyes, spies, of what was up there in the Castle . . . watching eyes . . . and yet it would have been more horrible to be here alone . . .

Down, down the hill, the new road cut through old rock . . . the red rawness, the blurred growth defiantly returning to close the wound.

Could see now, ahead, the dried up channel of Venetian harbor where kids played football with a punctured beachball, a torn net . . . and wished instead of giving them the tiny plastic balls the ice-cream came in, after use, had bought them a real ball . . . only her and husband would laugh . . . no, worse, would say "You do what you like" in ways that made her feel worse still . . . still more a fool . . .

Behind her now miles, maybe, that tangle of blackthorn and rough pasture, that pre-Raphaelite dream land . . .

Fragments of the talk from that year, that castle yard, that sick romantic place where magic was ugly as a slum yard full of girls grown up too quick spitting swollen contraceptives from their teeth into the grass, and laughing with yellow spiteful teeth among the broken bottles . . .

Shreds like her torn skin she could not remember getting . . .

"How long does the gift take to act?"

"No longer than an aspirin on an empty stomach, my foolish faithless

modern children. No longer for you than for the least of these faithful peasants.”

Over the meeting, like angels, cherubs, over a mating far off flew bats, flies, maybe old jet planes, her son would have known if they were gnats, meteors, lightnings, what . . . far off, anyway, black specks only, feeders on corpses . . .

Back at the quay, the main waterfront of the town, and the lounging idlers, the black-cape crones, seemed another gauntlet . . . the hotel at last, and even the receptionist with her odd misplaced tooth, as Mariella gasped her longing for the key to the room, feeling trapped as if in treacle at the final gate of peace, seemed to laugh like a wind out of some ultimate vacuum . . .

She stumbled up to the room, and heedless of pains, threw herself face down on the bed, not even thinking an instant of cleaning herself up before her husband and children returned . . . as if it was too late for such pretense, such shame, that this once at least they would have to, her husband, see her, as she really was . . . a real being . . . someone would could be scared, could need . . . thoughts ago frightened her, fear of wrinkles, cancer biting between her legs in dreams, fatness, having to pass young drunks, teenagers at the bus stop as she went for her husband's cigarettes . . .

Surely, Mariella thought, her mind swept by waves of darkness like the onset of sleep, in turn each withdrawing to leave odd discoveries flotsam behind, surely she had a right to be afraid . . . and for him to know, to notice . . . if he wouldn't give her pat, affection, caress, at least let him give her boot, stone, anything, not just well-intended indifference . . . she was more surely than the background song on a juke-box in a pub you only notice when it's turned off, a TV talking to itself unnoticed in corner . . . a book to reread over and over, though even that he'd notice more . . .

well, tonight, here, when they returned, let them see her torn, bleeding, afraid . . . not fount of wisdom, healing, calm . . . someone who needed them . . . *needed* . . . let's see what they said then . . . as she told them, told them it all, not even putting the frightening bits, the obscene bits, into baby talk so the children wouldn't be frightened . . . her husband so full of theories, so enlightened as he thought, and daren't even talk to his own children about sex, went out of the room if anything came on the television about it, in case they might ask him questions, or said, “Shush, I'm listening to this” . . .

would he listen to this from her? Could she compete with his mind, his guidebook . . . his notes . . . would he listen as she told of the moment



of granting of wishes . . . the circle of obscene kisses . . . no way of knowing, was she excited, frightened, face into flesh, brown smell of dung, dry blow of dust, and tongue into her too behind . . . and the courtyard of the castle a farm, and they three animals in it, and the voice of the Masters calling them to be milked, slaughtered . . . fed . . .

The splitting of skins, a birth of real selves . . . born, borne of this . . . out of their shrunken selves into their . . . what . . . hopes, fears? she didn't dare to decide, know . . . the German boy a huge swift snake now, his sister a smooth white rat . . . running to each other as lovers in a Hollywood musical . . . snake eats rat, turns, looks at Mariella . . . god, did she dare tell her husband how she longed for it, him, to come for her too . . . it examined her, came nearer, nearer, bulging, coppery, glitter glorious as a window in York Cathedral . . . picked up her flesh in a great coil, as she relaxed, slack against such lovely coolness, longing for the huge faceted thing to enter her, eat her from all directions, from within, without . . .

Only it dropped her as if in contempt . . . and she wept at such rejection . . . and it swung swiftly as a bowstring bends and then releases over the low wall of the well and vanished downwards into darkness, fat, swollen, but so fluidly sweetly fine, no pregnant limping lump despite its huge meal, more a knife diving down entrails to split the world . . .

and from that same depth beneath the ground, where the Fall had been so deep there came back not splash but merely hissing silence, came the Keeper's voice, he who had vanished while the two animals he had made to their wish had met and merged . . . "As for you, girl . . . I have no gift for youuuuu. All you desire is emptiness and that is in your grasssp . . ." and the wind hissed and the two hollow human skins the German siblings had left behind danced like toy balloons half-deflated round the duts . . . pink, plastic looking, sacks for any deformed person, any hunchback with hump upon her stomach, and hunchback with hunch to hide her fears, to crawl inside and conceal wounded mind in misdirectingly purloined letter obvious physical misshapeness . . .

soft rain, and blackness . . . and the run torn bleeding through sudden shallow ponds and dry ditches and thousands of red eyes on bushes and at last came this bed . . . this resting place . . . on which she lay like a storm down from the mountain seeking new victims, and instead lured to rest and flood like a breaking of belly water on an empty land, a waiting place . . .

and a long time later all her sobs even were done . . . and her breath at the end quiet . . .

and, moving slowly, carefully, so's not to spill any of this new found

tranquility, she washed, changed, hid scratches with make-up, powder, suntan oil, all that was needful . . .

And unravaged, looking almost as a bride, faced husband and children when they at last reappeared . . .

Saying, "Colin, kids I'm glad you're back . . . did you have a nice day?"



THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES

XV



To Peter Straub

*Remembering those fatal pints of bitter at Peter's Bar on  
Southampton Row.*



## INTRODUCTION

### What's in a Name?

THERE SEEMS to be a great deal of hair-splitting and hair-pulling in recent years over definitions and distinctions throughout the various genres and subgenres of science fiction and fantasy. The term "horror" seems to offend some readers and writers. The word tends to conjure grotesque and overplayed images and concepts. Outdated and unsubtle. Time for something new, more upscale. ("No, dear—I don't write horror. I write dark fantasy, don't you know.") Or maybe something with a harder edge to it. ("Piss off and die! I'm a New Wave writer!")

Maybe it's because "horror" tends to conjure forth mindless splatterfilms and schlock novels about giant maggots, but more likely it's because the term has always caused polite sniffs and raised eyebrows in polite society. Perhaps that's why the American pulp tradition (*Weird Tales*, *Terror Tales*, *Horror Stories*) popularized the designation "horror," while the English tradition favored the more genteel "ghost stories." But then, let's not forget that the "supernatural" story relies upon otherworldly forces, while the "terror" story depends upon direct physical threats. Of course, the "suspense" story has no fantastic element at all, and the "psychological" story relies upon all those submerged fears within our subconscious.

Then there's "contemporary horror"—never mind that *Dracula* was contemporary for its day. Or "New Wave horror"—forget that *Frankenstein* was avant garde in 1818. As for new trends toward explicit sex and gore, Matthew Gregory Lewis was already grossing out his readers in 1796 with *The Monk*. H.P. Lovecraft was defying the Establishment by introducing concepts of totally nonhuman forces of evil into his writing in the 1920s.

The point is that "horror" remains a convenient catch-all term for stories that, on one or more levels, create within us a sense of fear or unease. The props and orientation are not important, except as a matter



of individual taste, so long as the overall effect upon the reader is a shiver—physically or emotionally, but best when there's both.

And so—welcome to Series XV of *The Year's Best Horror, Terror, Uncanny, Shocking, Chilling, Unnerving, Supernatural, Ghostly, New Wave, Dark Fantasy Stories*.

I've probably omitted a few labels there, but the truth is that we do have a diverse grouping with this year's selections. *Locus* estimated that some 200 horror stories were published during 1986, but I can assure you that their estimate is far too low—primarily due to the common appearance of horror fiction in nongenre publications and to the sudden upsurge of new small press publications devoted to horror.

I have edited the last eight volumes of *The Year's Best Horror Stories*, and 1986 has certainly been the most prolific year for horror fiction to date. So. Here they are: Eighteen of the best of the hundreds of horror stories published this past year. For about half of the authors, this is their first appearance ever in *The Year's Best Horror Stories*—a certain sign that the genre is anything but stagnant and incestuous. And there are some old hands here as well—some back after a long absence. Years of birth range from 1917 to 1963, with a number of writers turning up who were born in the 1950s. Another evidence that new blood is coming into the genre, but I'm not certain what to make of the high number of those with birthdays grouped in September.

As always, stories are selected without regard to an author's name or fame. There are no categories, taboos, or predetermined subgenres. Stories here include traditional and New Wave, ghostly and science fiction, psychological and gut-level, dark fantasy and loud fantasy—well, you get the idea.

These are horror stories—and they're the best.

Labels don't matter.

After all, blood by any other name would run as red.

—Karl Edward Wagner

## The Yougoslaves

Robert Bloch

*"The Yougoslaves" marks a return to The Year's Best Horror Stories by Robert Bloch after too long an absence. The positive side of that one is that Bloch has been too busy with screenplays and novels in recent years to find time to spare for short fiction. Hard to complain, since Bloch excels in all three of these disciplines—but a pleasure to see him active once again in the short story genre.*

*Born in Chicago on April 5, 1917, Robert Bloch might have been America's foremost stand-up comedian had he not been inspired by exposure to The Phantom of the Opera and Weird Tales to become the dean of modern horror writers. Bent twig or teenage prodigy, Bloch saw his first story, "Lilies," published in the Winter 1934 issue of Marvel Tales and the following year his stories began to appear in Weird Tales Bloch's early fiction was heavily influenced by H.P. Lovecraft, and each author used the other as the doomed protagonist in a pair of linked stories. While the young Bloch was arguably the best of that circle of writers who sat about Lovecraft's throne, he quickly went on to develop his own concepts and directions within the horror genre. With the publication of his novel, The Scarf, in 1947, Bloch established himself as a master of psychological horror; his 1959 novel, Psycho, proved him to be The Master in this field. Bloch's nerve-racking explorations of the mind of the psychotic killer have made him the most widely imitated writer in modern horror fiction. The other side of Bloch's writing is a macabre sense of humor, ranging from sardonic wit to horrendous puns. Humor and horror, he argues, are flip sides of the same coin—and it doesn't pay to argue with Robert Bloch.*

*Entering his sixth decade of writing, Bloch continues to be astonishingly prolific. Just as the new year begins, he is at work on a new novel; has just finished a new script for the television series, Tales from the Darkside; is awaiting publication shortly of two new collections, Lost in Time and Space with Lefty Feep and Midnight Pleasures; and is preparing two more collections and another novel or so. Regarding the following story, Bloch says: "It's based on a real-life experience of mine in Paris. Part of it is fiction—but just which part will be up to the reader to decide."*

I DIDN'T COME TO Paris for adventure.

Long experience has taught me there are no Phantoms in the Opera, no bearded artists hobbling through Montmartre on stunted legs, no straw-hatted *boulevardiers* singing the praises of a funny little honey of a Mimi.

The Paris of story and song, if it ever existed, is no more. Times have changed, and even the term "Gay Paree" now evokes what in theatrical parlance is called a bad laugh.

A visitor learns to change habits accordingly, and my hotel choice was a case in point. On previous trips I'd stayed at the Crillon or the Ritz; now, after a lengthy absence, I put up at the George V.

Let me repeat, I wasn't seeking adventure. That first evening I left the hotel for a short stroll merely to satisfy my curiosity about the city.

I had already discovered that some aspects of Paris remain immutable; the French still don't seem to understand how to communicate by telephone, and they can't make a good cup of coffee. But I had no need to use the phone and no craving for coffee, so these matters didn't concern me.

Nor was I greatly surprised to discover that April in Paris—*Paris in the spring, tra-la-la-la*—is apt to be cold and damp. Warmly-dressed for my little outing, I directed my footsteps to the archways of the Rue de Rivoli.

At first glance Paris by night upheld its traditions. All of the tourist attractions remained in place; the steel skeleton of the Eiffel Tower, the gaping maw of the Arch of Triumph, the spurting fountains achieving their miraculous transubstantiation of water into blood with the aid of crimson light.

But there were changes in the air—quite literally—the acrid odor of traffic fumes emanating from the exhausts of snarling sports cars and growling motor bikes racing along to the counterpoint of police and ambulance sirens. Gershwin's tinny taxi-horns would be lost in such din; I doubt if he'd approve, and I most certainly did not.

My disapproval extended to the clothing of local pedestrians. Young Parisian males now mimicked the youths of other cities; bare-headed, leather-jacketed, and blue-jeaned, they would look equally at home in Times Square on on Hollywood Boulevard. As for their female companions, this seemed to be the year when every girl in France decided to don atrociously-wrinkled patent leather boots which turned shapely lower limbs into the legs of elephantiasis victims. The *chic* Parisienne had

vanished, and above the traffic's tumult I fancied I could detect a sound of rumbling dismay as Napoleon turned over in his tomb.

I moved along under the arches, eyeing the lighted window displays of expensive jewelry mingled with cheap gimcracks. At least the Paris of tourism hadn't altered; there would still be sex shops in the Pigalle, and somewhere in the deep darkness of the Louvre the Mona Lisa smiled enigmatically at the antics of those who came to the city searching for adventure.

Again I say this was not my intention. Nonetheless, adventure sought me.

Adventure came on the run, darting out of a dark and deserted portion of the arcade just ahead, charging straight at me on a dozen legs.

It happened quickly. One moment I was alone; then suddenly and without warning, the children came. There were six of them, surrounding me like a small army—six dark-haired, swarthy-skinned urchins in dirty, disheveled garments, screeching and jabbering at me in a foreign tongue. Some of them clutched at my clothing, others jabbed me in the ribs. Encircling me they clamored for a beggar's bounty, and as I fumbled for loose change one of them thrust a folded newspaper against my chest, another grabbed and kissed my free hand, yet another grasped my shoulder and whirled me around. Deafened by the din, dazed by their instant attack, I broke free.

In seconds, they scattered swiftly and silently, scampering into the shadows. As they disappeared I stood alone again, stunned and shaken. Then, as my hand rose instinctively to press against my inner breast pocket, I realized that my wallet had disappeared too.

My first reaction was shock. To think that I, a grown man, had been robbed on the public street by a band of little ragamuffins, less than ten years old!

It was an outrage, and now I met it with rage of my own. The sheer audacity of their attack provoked anger, and the thought of the consequences fueled my fury. Losing the money in the wallet wasn't important; he who steals my purse steals trash.

But there was something else I cherished; something secret and irreplaceable. I carried it in a billfold compartment for a purpose; after completing my sightseeing jaunt I'd intended to seek another destination and make use of the other item my wallet contained.

Now it was gone, and hope vanished with it.

But not entirely. The sound of distant sirens in the night served as a strident reminder that I still had a chance. There was, I remembered, a police station near the Place Vendome. The inconspicuous office was not

easy to locate on the darkened street beyond an open courtyard, but I managed.

Once inside, I anticipated a conversation with an *Inspecteur*, a return to the scene of the affair in the company of sympathetic *gendarmes* who were knowledgeable concerning such offenses and alert in ferreting out the hiding place of my assailants.

The young lady seated behind the window in the dingy outer office listened to my story without comment or a change of expression. Inserting forms and carbons in her typewriter, she took down a few vital statistics—my name, date of birth, place of origin, hotel address, and a short inventory of the stolen wallet's contents.

For reasons of my own I neglected to mention the one item that really mattered to me. I could be excused for omitting it in my excited state, and hoped to avoid the necessity of doing so unless the *Inspecteur* questioned me more closely.

But there was no interview with an *Inspecteur*, and no uniformed officer appeared. Instead I was merely handed a carbon copy of the *Recepisse de Declaration*; if anything could be learned about the fate of my wallet I would be notified at my hotel.

Scarcely ten minutes after entering the station I found myself back on the street with nothing to show for my trouble but a buff-colored copy of the report. Down at the very bottom, on a line identified in print as *Mode Operatoire—Precisions Complementaires*, was a typed sentence reading "*Vol commis dans la Rue par de jeunes enfant yougoslaves.*"

"Yougoslaves?"

Back at the hotel I address the question to an elderly nightclerk. Sleepy eyes blinking into nervousness, he nodded knowingly.

"Ah!" he said. "The gypsies!"

"Gypsies? But these were only children—"

He nodded again. "Exactly so." And then he told me the story.

Pickpockets and purse-snatchers had always been a common nuisance here, but within the past few years their presence had escalated.

They came out of Eastern Europe, their exact origin unknown, but "yougoslaves" or "gypsies" served as a convenient label.

Apparently they were smuggled in by skillful and enterprising adult criminals who specialized in educating children in the art of thievery, very much as Fagin trained his youngsters in the London of Dickens' *Oliver Twist*.

But Fagin was an amateur compared to today's professors of pilfering. Their pupils—orphans, products of broken homes, or no homes at all—were recruited in foreign city streets, or even purchased outright

from greedy, uncaring parents. These little ones could be quite valuable; an innocent at the age of four or five became a seasoned veteran after a few years of experience, capable of bringing in as much as a hundred thousand American dollars over the course of a single year.

When I described the circumstances of my own encounter the clerk shrugged.

"Of course. That is how they work, my friend—in gangs." Gangs, expertly adept in spotting potential victims, artfully instructed how to operate. Their seemingly spontaneous outcries were actually the product of long and exacting rehearsal, their apparently impromptu movements perfected in advance. They danced around me because they had been choreographed to do so. It was a bandits' ballet in which each one played an assigned role—to nudge, to gesture, to jab and jabber and create confusion. Even the hand-kissing was part of a master plan, and when one ragged waif thrust his folded newspaper against my chest it concealed another who ducked below and lifted my wallet. The entire performance was programmed down to the last detail.

I listened and shook my head. "Why don't the police tell me these things? Surely they must know."

"*Oui, M'sieur.*" The clerk permitted himself a confidential wink. "But perhaps they do not care." He leaned across the desk, his voice sinking to a murmur. "Some say an arrangement has been made. The yougoslaves are skilled in identifying tourists by their dress and manner. They can recognize a foreign visitor merely by the kind of shoes he wears. One supposes a bargain has been struck because it is only the tourists who are attacked, while ordinary citizens are spared."

I frowned. "Surely others like myself must lodge complaints. One would think the police would be forced to take action."

The clerk's gesture was as eloquent as his words. "But what can they do? These yougoslaves strike quickly, without warning. They vanish before you realize what has happened, and no one knows where they go. And even if you managed to lay hands on one of them, what then? You bring this youngster to the police and tell your story, but the little ruffian has no wallet—you can be sure it was passed along immediately to another who ran off with the evidence. Also, your prisoner cannot speak or understand French, or at least pretends not to."

"So the gendarmes have nothing to go by but your words, and what can they do with the kid if they did have proof, when the law prohibits the arrest and jailing of children under thirteen?"

"It's all part of the scheme. And if you permit me, it is a beautiful scheme, this one."

My frown told him I lacked appreciation of beauty, and he quickly leaned back to a position of safety behind the desk, his voice and manner sobering. "Missing credit cards can be reported in the morning, though I think it unlikely anyone would be foolish enough to attempt using them with a forged signature. It's the money they were after."

"I have other funds in your safe," I said.

"*Tres bien*. In that case I advise you to make the best of things. Now that you know what to expect, I doubt if you will be victimized again. Just keep away from the tourist traps and avoid using the Metro." He offered me the solace of a smile which all desk clerks reserve for complaints about stalled elevators, lost luggage, faulty electrical fixtures, or clogged plumbing.

Then, when my frown remained fixed, his smile vanished. "Please, my friend! I understand this has been a most distressing occurrence, but I trust you will chalk it up to experience. Believe me, there is no point in pursuing the matter further."

I shook my head. "If the police won't go after these children—"

"Children?" Again his voice descended to a murmur. "Perhaps I did not make myself clear. The yougoslaves are not ordinary kids. As I say, they have been trained by masters. The kind of man who is capable of buying or stealing a child and corrupting it for a life of crime is not likely to stop there. I have heard certain rumors, *M'sieur*, rumors which make a dreadful sort of sense. These kids, they are hooked on drugs. They know every manner of vice but nothing of morals, and many carry knives, even guns. Some have been taught to break and enter into homes, and if discovered, to kill. Their masters, of course, are even more dangerous when crossed. I implore you, for your own safety—forget what has happened tonight and go on your way."

"Thank you for your advice." I managed a smile and went on my way. But I did not forget.

I did not forget what had happened, nor did I forget I'd been robbed of what was most precious to me.

Retiring to my room, I placed the *Do Not Disturb* sign on the outer doorknob and after certain makeshift arrangements I sank eventually into fitful slumber.

By the following evening I was ready; ready and waiting. Paris by night is the City of Light, but it is also the city of shadows. And it was in the shadows that I waited, the shadows under the archways of the Rue de Rivoli. My dark clothing was deliberately donned to blend inconspicuously with the background; I would be unnoticed if the predators returned to seek fresh prey.

Somehow I felt convinced that they would do so. As I stood against a pillar, scanning the occasional passerby who wandered past, I challenged myself to see the hunted through the eyes of the hunters.

Who would be the next victim? That party of Japanese deserved no more than a glance of dismissal; it wasn't wise to confront a group. By the same token, those who traveled in pairs or couples would be spared. And even the lone pedestrians were safe if they were able-bodied or dressed in garments which identified them as local citizens.

What the hunters sought was someone like myself, someone wearing clothing of foreign cut, preferably elderly and obviously alone. Someone like the gray-headed old gentleman who was approaching now, shuffling past a cluster of shops already closed for the night. He was short, slight of build, and his uncertain gait hinted at either a physical impairment or mild intoxication. A lone traveler on an otherwise-deserted stretch of street—he was the perfect target for attack.

And the attack came.

Out of the deep dark doorway to an arcade the yougoslaves danced forth, squealing and gesticulating, to suddenly surround their startled victim.

They ringed him, hands outstretched, their cries confusing, their fingers darting forth to prod and pry in rhythm with the outbursts.

I saw the pattern now, recognized the roles they played. Here was the hand-kisser, begging for bounty, here the duo tugging at each arm from the rear, here the biggest of the boys, brandishing the folded paper to thrust it against the oldster's chest while an accomplice burrowed into the gaping front of the jacket below. Just behind him the sixth and smallest of the band stood poised. The instant the wallet was snatched it would be passed to him, and while the others continued their distractions for a few moments more before scattering, he'd run off in safety.

The whole charade was brilliant in its sheer simplicity, cleverly contrived so that the poor old gentleman would never notice his loss until too late.

But I noticed—and I acted.

As the thieves closed in I stepped forward, quickly and quietly. Intent on their quarry, they were unaware of my approach. Moving up behind the youngster who waited to receive the wallet, I grasped his upraised arm in a tight grip, bending it back against his shoulderblade as I yanked him away into the shadows. He looked up and my free hand clamped across his oval mouth before he could cry out.

He tried to bite, but my fingers pressed his lips together. He tried to kick, but I twisted his bent arm and tugged him along offbalance, his feet



dragging over the pavement as we moved past the shadowy archway to the curb beyond.

My rental car was waiting there. Opening the door, I hurled him down onto the seat face-forward. Before he could turn I pulled the handcuffs from my pocket and snapped them shut over his wrists.

Locking the passenger door, I hastened around to the other side of the car and entered, sliding behind the wheel. Seconds later we were moving out into the traffic.

Hands confined behind him, my captive threshed helplessly beside me. He could scream now, and he did.

"Stop that!" I commanded. "No one can hear you with the windows closed."

After a moment he obeyed. As we turned off onto a side street he glared up at me, panting.

"*Merde!*" he gasped.

I smiled. "So you speak French, do you?"

There was no reply. But when the car turned again, entering one of the narrow alleyways off the Rue St. Roch, his eyes grew wary.

"Where are we going?"

"That is a question for you to answer."

"What do you mean?"

"You will be good enough to direct me to the place where I can find your friends."

"Go to hell!"

"*Au contraire.*" I smiled again. "If you do not cooperate, and quickly, I'll knock you over the head and dump your body in the Seine."

"You old bastard—you can't scare me!"

Releasing my right hand from the steering wheel I gave him a clout across the mouth, knocking him back against the seat.

"That's a sample," I told him. "Next time I won't be so gentle." Clenching my fist, I raised my arm again, and he cringed.

"Tell me!" I said.

And he did.

The blow across the mouth seemed to have loosened his tongue, for he began to answer my questions as I reversed our course and crossed over a bridge which brought us to the Left Bank.

When he told me our destination and described it, I must confess I was surprised. The distance was much greater than I anticipated, and finding the place would not be easy, but I followed his directions on a mental map. Meanwhile I encouraged Bobo to speak.

That was his name—Bobo. If he had another he claimed he did not

know it, and I believed him. He was nine years old but he'd been with the gang for three of them, ever since their leader spirited him off the streets of Dubrovnik and brought him here to Paris on a long and illegal route while hidden in the back of a truck.

"Dubrovnik?" I nodded. "Then you really are a yougoslave. What about the others?"

"I don't know. They come from everywhere. Wherever he finds them."

"Your leader? What's his name?"

"We call him Le Boss."

"He taught you how to steal like this?"

"He taught us many things." Bobo gave me a sidelong glance. "Listen to me, old man—if you find him there will be big trouble. Better to let me go."

"Not until I have my wallet."

"Wallet?" His eyes widened, then narrowed, and I realized that for the first time he'd recognized me as last night's victim. "If you think Le Boss will give you back your money, then you really are a fool."

"I'm not a fool. And I don't care about the money."

"Credit cards? Don't worry, Le Boss won't try to use them. Too risky."

"It's not the cards. There was something else. Didn't you see it?"

"I never touched your wallet. It was Pepe who took it to the van last night."

The van, I learned, was always parked just around the corner from the spot where the gang set up operations. And it was there that they fled after a robbery. Le Boss waited behind the wheel with the motor running; the stolen property was turned over to him immediately as they drove off to safer surroundings.

"So Le Boss has the wallet now," I said.

"Perhaps. Sometimes he takes the money out and throws the billfold away. But if there was more than money and cards inside as you say—" Bobo hesitated, peering up at me. "What is this thing you're looking for?"

"That is a matter I will discuss with Le Boss when I see him."

"Diamonds, maybe? You a smuggler?"

"No."

His eyes brightened and he nodded quickly. "Cocaine? Don't worry, I get some for you, no problem—good stuff, not the junk they cut for street trade. All you want, and cheap, too."

I shook my head. "Stop guessing. I talk only to Le Boss."

But Bobo continued to eye me as I guided the car out of the suburban residential and industrial areas, through a stretch of barren countryside, and into an unpaved side road bordering the empty lower reaches of the

river. There were no lights here, no dwellings, no signs of life—only shadows, silence, and swaying trees.

Bobo was getting nervous, but now he forced a smile.

“Hey, old man—you like girls? Le Boss got one the other day.”

“Not interested.”

“I mean *little* girls. Fresh meat, only five, six maybe—”

I shook my head again and he sidled closer on the seat. “What about boys? I’m good, you’ll see. Even Le Boss says so—”

He rubbed against me; his clothes were filthy and he smelled of sweat and garlic. “Never mind,” I said quickly, pushing him away.

“Okay,” he murmured. “I figured if we did a deal you’d give up trying to see Le Boss. It’s just going to make things bad for you, and there’s no sense getting yourself hurt.”

“I appreciate your concern.” I smiled. “But it’s not me you’re really worried about. You’ll be the one who gets hurt for bringing me, is that not so?”

He stared at me without replying but I read the answer in his fear-filled eyes.

“What will he do to you?” I said.

The fear spilled over into his voice. “Please, *M’sieur*—don’t tell him how you got here! I will do anything you want, anything—”

“You’ll do exactly what I say,” I told him.

He glanced ahead, and again I read his eyes.

“Are we here?” I asked. “Is this the place?”

“*Oui*. But—”

“Be silent.” I shut off the motor and headlights, but not before the beam betrayed a glimpse of the river bank beyond the rutted side road. Through the tangle of trees and rampant underbrush I could see the parked van hidden from sight amidst the sheltering shadows ahead. Beyond it, spanning the river, was a crude and ancient wooden foot bridge, the narrow and rotting relic of a bygone era.

I slipped out of the car, circling to the other side, then opened the passenger door and collared my captive.

“Where are they?” I whispered.

“On the other side.” Bobo’s voice was faint but the apprehension it held was strong. “Please don’t make me take you there!”

“Shut up and come with me.” I jerked him forward toward the trees, then halted as I stared across the rickety old makeshift bridge. The purpose it served in the past was long forgotten, and so was the huge oval on the far bank which opened close to the water’s edge.

But Le Boss had not forgotten. Once this great circular conduit was

part of the earliest Paris sewer-system. Deep within its depths, dozens of connecting branches converged into a gigantic single outlet and spewed their waste into the water below. Now the interior channels had been sealed off, leaving the main tunnel dry but not deserted. For it was here, within a circle of metal perhaps twenty feet in diameter, that Le Boss found shelter from prying eyes, past the unused dirt road and the abandoned bridge.

The huge opening gaped like the mouth of Hell, and from within the fires of Hell blazed forth.

Actually the fires were merely the product of candle light flickering from tapers set in niches around the base of the tunnel. I sensed that their value was not only practical but precautionary, for they would be quickly extinguished in the event of an alarm.

Alarm?

I tugged at Bobo's soiled collar. "The lookout," I murmured. "Where is he?"

Reluctantly the boy stabbed a finger in the direction of a tall and tangled weed bordering the side of the bridge. In the shadows I made out a small shape huddled amid surrounding clumps of vegetation.

"Sandor." My captive nodded. "He's asleep."

I glanced up. "What about Le Boss and the others?"

"Inside the sewer. Farther back, where nobody can see them."

"Good. You will go in now."

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone." As I spoke I took out my key and unlocked the handcuffs, but my grip on Bobo's neck did not loosen.

He rubbed his chafed wrists. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Tell Le Boss that I grabbed you on the street, but you broke free and ran."

"How do I say I got here?"

"Perhaps you hitched a ride."

"And then—"

"You didn't know I was following you, not until I caught you here again. Tell him I'm waiting on this side of the river until you bring me my key. Once I get it I will go away—no questions asked, no harm done."

Bobo frowned. "Suppose he doesn't have the key?"

"He will," I said. "You see, it's just an old brass gate-key, but the handle is shaped into my family crest. Mounted in the crest is a large ruby."

Bobo's frown persisted. "What if he just pried it loose and threw the key away?"

"That's possible." I shrugged. "But you had better pray he didn't." My

fingers dug into his neck. "I want that key, understand? And I want it now."

"He's not going to give it to you, not Le Boss! Why should he?"

For answer I dragged him toward the sleeping sentry in the weeds. Reaching into my jacket I produced a knife. As Bobo gaped in surprise, I aimed a kick at the slumbering lookout. He blinked and sat up quickly, then froze as I pressed the tip of the broad blade against his neck.

"Tell him that if you don't bring me back the key in five minutes I'll cut Sandor's throat."

Sandor believed me, I know, because he started to whimper. And Bobo believed me too, for when I released my grip on his collar he started running toward the bridge.

Now there was only one question. Would Le Boss believe me?

I sincerely hoped so. But for the moment all I could do was be patient. Yanking the sniveling Sandor to his feet, I tugged him along to position myself at the edge of the bridge, staring across it as Bobo reached the mouth of the sewer on the other side. The mouth swallowed him; I stood waiting.

Except for the rasp of Sandor's hoarse breathing, the night was still. No sound emanated from the great oval of the sewer across the river, and my vision could not penetrate the flashing of flame from within.

But the reflection of the light served me as I studied my prisoner. Like Bobo, he had the body of a child, but the face peering up at me was incongruously aged—not by wrinkles but by the grim set of his cracked lips, the gaunt hollows beneath protruding cheekbones, and the sunken circles outlining the eyes above. The eyes were old, those deep dark eyes that had witnessed far more than any child should see. In them I read a present submissiveness, but that was merely surface reaction. Beyond it lay a cold cunning, a cruel craftiness governed not by intelligence but by animal instinct, fully developed, ready for release. And he was an animal, I told myself; a predator, dwelling in a cave, issuing forth to satisfy ageless atavistic hungers.

He hadn't been born that way, of course. It was Le Boss who transformed the innocence of childhood into amoral impulse, who eradicated humanity and brought forth the beast beneath.

Le Boss. What was he doing now? Surely Bobo had reached him by this time, told his tale. What was happening? I held Sandor close at knife-point, my eyes searching the swirl of firelight and shadow deep in the tunnel's iron maw.

Then, suddenly and shockingly, the metal mouth screamed.

The high, piercing echo rose only for an instant before fading into silence, but I knew its source.

Tightening my grip on Sandor's ragged collar and pressing the knife blade close to his throat, I started toward the foot bridge.

"No!" he quavered. "Don't—"

I ignored his panting plea, his futile efforts to free himself. Thrusting him forward, I crossed the swaying structure, averting my gaze from the dank depths beneath and focusing vision and purpose on the opening ahead.

Passing between the flame-tipped teeth of the candles on either side, I dragged Sandor down into the sewer's yawning throat. I was conscious of the odor now, the odor of carrion corruption which welled from the dark inner recesses, conscious of the clang of our footsteps against the rounded metal surface, but my attention was directed elsewhere.

A dark bundle of rags lay across the curved base of the tunnel. Skirting it as we approached, I saw I'd been mistaken. The rags were merely a covering, outlining the twisted form beneath.

Bobo had made a mistake too, for it was his body that sprawled motionless there. The grotesque angle of his neck and the splinter of bone protruding from an outflung arm indicated that he had fallen from above. Fallen, or perhaps been hurled.

My eyes sought the rounded ceiling of the sewer. It was, as I'd estimated, easily twenty feet high, but I didn't have to scan the top to confirm my guess as to Bobo's fate.

Just ahead, at the left of the rounded iron wall, was a wooden ladder propped against the side of a long, broad shelf mounted on makeshift scaffolding which rose perhaps a dozen feet from the sewer's base. Here the candles were affixed to poles at regular intervals, illuminating a vast humbled heap of hand luggage, rucksacks, attache cases, boxes, packages, purses, and moldy, mildewed articles of clothing, piled into a thieves' mountain of stolen goods.

And here, squatting before them on a soiled and aging mattress, amid a litter of emptied and discarded bottles, Le Boss squatted.

There was no doubt as to his identity; I recognized him by his mocking smile, the cool casualness with which he rose to confront me after I'd forced Sandor up the ladder and onto the platform.

The man who stood swaying before us was a monster. Forgive the term, but there is no other single word to describe him. Le Boss was well over six feet tall, and the legs enclosed in the dirt-smudged trousers of his soiled suit were bowed and bent by the sheer immensity of the burden they bore. He must have weighed over three hundred pounds, and the

fat bulging from his bloated belly and torso was almost obscene in its abundance. His huge hands terminated in fingers as thick as sausages.

There was no shirt beneath the tightly-stretched suit jacket and from a cord around his thick neck a whistle dangled against the naked chest. His head was bullet-shaped and bald. Indeed, he was completely hairless—no hint of eyebrows surmounted the hyperthyroid pupils, no lashes guarded the red-rimmed sockets. The porcine cheeks and sagging jowls were beardless, their fleshy folds worm-white even in the candle light which glittered against the tiny, tawny eyes.

I needed to second glance to confirm my suspicions of what had occurred before my arrival here; the scene I pictured in my mind was perfectly clear. The coming of Bobo, the breathless, stammered story, his master's reaction of mingled disbelief and anger, the fit of drunken fury in which the terrified bringer of bad tidings had been flung over the side of the platform to smash like an empty bottle on the floor or the sewer below—I saw it all too vividly.

Le Boss grinned at me, his fleshy lips parted to reveal yellowed stumps of rotting teeth.

"Well, old man?" he spoke in French, but his voice was oddly accented; he could indeed be a yougoslave.

I forced myself to meet his gaze. "You know why I'm here," I said.

He nodded. "Something about a key, I take it."

"Your pack of thieves took it. But it's my property."

His grin broadened. "My property now." The deep voice rumbled with mocking relish. "Suppose I'm not inclined to return it?"

For answer I shoved Sandor before me and raised the knife, poisoning it against his neck. My captive trembled and made mewling sounds as the blade pressed closer.

Le Boss shrugged. "You'll have to do better than that, old man. A child's life isn't important to me."

I peered down at Bobo's body lying below. "So I see." Striving to conceal my reaction, I faced him again. "But where are the others?"

"Playing, I imagine."

"Playing?"

"You find that strange, old man? In spite of what you may think, I'm not without compassion. After all, they are only children. They work hard, and they deserve the reward of play."

Le Boss turned, gesturing down toward the far recesses of the sewer. My eyes followed his gaze through the shifting candle glow, and for the first time I became aware of movement in the dim depths. Faint noises echoed upward, identifiable now as the sound of childish laughter. Tiny

shapes moved below and beyond, shapes which gleamed white amid the shadows.

The yougoslaves were naked, and at play. I counted four of them, scuffling and squatting in the far reaches of the tunnel.

But wait! There was a fifth figure, slightly smaller than the others who loomed over it and laughed as they pawed the squirming shape or tugged at the golden hair. Over their mirth rose the sound of sobbing, and over that, the echo of Bobo's voice.

*Hey, old man—you like girls? Fresh meat, only five, six maybe—*

Now I could see only too clearly. Two of the boys held their victim down, spread-eagled and helpless, while the other two—but I shall not describe what they were doing.

Glancing away, I again met Le Boss' smile. Somehow it seemed more hideous to me than the sight below.

He groped for a bottle propped against the pile of loot beside him and drank before speaking. "You are distressed, eh?"

I shook my head. "Not as much as you'll be unless you give me back my key."

He smiled. "Empty threats will get you nothing but empty hands."

"My hands aren't empty." I jabbed the knife at Sandor's neck, grazing the flesh, and he squealed in terror.

Le Boss shrugged. "Go ahead. I told you it doesn't matter to me."

For a moment I stood irresolute. Then, with a sigh I drew the knife back from Sandor's throat and released my hold on his sweat-soaked collar. He turned and raced off to the ladder behind me, and I could hear his feet scraping against the rungs as he descended. Mercifully, the sound muffled the laughter from below.

Le Boss nodded. "That's better. Now we can discuss the situation like gentlemen."

I lifted the knife. "Not as long as I have this, and you have the key."

"More empty threats?"

"My knife speaks for me." I took a step forward as I spoke.

He chuckled. "I swear I don't know what to make of you, old man. Either you are very stupid or very brave."

"Both, perhaps." I raised the blade higher, but he halted my advance with a quick gesture.

"Enough," he wheezed. Turning, he stopped and thrust his pudgy hand into a tangle of scarves, kerchiefs, and handbags behind him. When he straightened again he was holding the key.

"Is this what you're after?"

"Yes. I knew you wouldn't discard it."



He stared at the red stone gleaming dully from the crested handle. "I never toss away valuables."

"Just human lives," I said.

"Don't preach to me, old man. I'm not interested in your philosophy."

"Nor I in yours." I stretched out my hand, palm upward. "All I want is my key."

His own hand drew back. "Not so fast. Suppose you tell me why."

"It's not the ruby," I answered. "Go ahead, pry it loose if you like."

Le Boss chuckled again. "A poor specimen—big enough, but flawed. It's the key itself that interests you, eh?"

"Naturally. As I told Bobo, it opens the gate to my estate."

"And just where is this estate of yours?"

"Near Bourg-la-Reine."

"That's not too far away." The little eyes narrowed. "The van could take us there within the hour."

"It would serve no purpose," I said. "Perhaps 'estate' is a misnomer. The place is small and holds nothing you'd be interested in. The furnishings are old, but hardly the quality of antiques. The house itself has been boarded up for years since my last visit. I have other properties elsewhere on the continent where I spend much of my time. But since I'll be here for several weeks on business, I prefer familiar surroundings."

"Other properties, eh?" Le Boss fingered the key. "You must be quite rich, old man."

"That's none of your affair."

"Perhaps not, but I was just thinking. If you have money, why not conduct your business in comfort from a hotel in Paris?"

I shrugged. "It's a matter of sentiment—"

"Really?" He eyed me sharply, and in the interval before speaking, I noted that the sounds below had ceased.

My voice broke the sudden silence. "I assure you—"

"*Au contraire*. You do not assure me in the least." Le Boss scowled. "If you do own an estate, then it's the key to the house that's important, not the one for the gate. Any locksmith could open it for you without the need of this particular key."

He squinted at the burnished brass, the dulled brilliance of the ruby imbedded in the ornate crest. "Unless, of course, it isn't a gate key after all. Looks to me more like the key to a strongbox, or even a room in the house holding hidden valuables."

"It's just a gate key." Again I held one hand out as the other gripped the knife. "But I want it—now."

"Enough to kill?" he challenged.

"If necessary."

"I'll spare you that." Grinning, Le Boss reached down again into a bundle of discarded clothing. When he turned to face me again he held a revolver in his hand.

"Drop that toothpick," he said, raising the weapon to reinforce his command.

Sighing, I released my grip and the knife fell, clattering over the side of the open platform to the surface of the sewer below.

Impelled by blind impulse, I turned hastily. If I could get to the ladder—

"Stand where you are!"

It wasn't his words, but the sharp clicking sound that halted me. Slowly I pivoted to face the muzzle of his cocked revolver.

"That's better," he said.

"You wouldn't murder me—not in cold blood."

"Let's leave it up to the kids." As Le Boss spoke his free hand fumbled for the whistle looped around his neck. Enfolding it in blubbery lips, he blew.

The piercing blast echoed, reverberating from the rounded iron walls beside me and below. Then came the answering murmurs, the sudden thud of footsteps. Out of the corner of my eye I glanced down and saw the four naked figures—no, there were five now, including the fully clothed Sandor—moving toward the platform on which we stood.

Again I conjured up a vision of Hell, of demons dancing in the flames. But the flames were merely candle light and the bodies hurrying beneath were those of children. It was only their laughter which was demonic. Their laughter, and their gleefully contorted faces.

As they approached I caught a glimpse of what they held in their hands. Sandor had scooped up the knife from where it had fallen and the others held weapons of their own—a mallet, a wooden club, a length of steel pipe, the serrated stump of a broken wine bottle.

Le Boss chuckled once more. "Playtime," he said.

"Call them off!" I shouted. "I warn you—"

He shook his head. "No way, old man."

*Old man.* That, I swear, is what did it. Not the menace of the gun, not the sight of the loathsome little creatures below. It was just the phrase, the contempt with which it had been repeated over and over again.

I knew what he was thinking—an unarmed, helpless elderly victim had been trapped for torment. And for the most part he was right. I was weaponless, old, trapped.

But not helpless.

Closing my eyes, I concentrated. There are subsonic whistles which make no audible sound, and there are ways of summoning which require no whistles at all. And there's more than human vermin infesting abandoned sewers, lurking in the far recesses of tangled tunnels, but responsive to certain commands.

Almost instantly that response came.

It came in the form of a purposeful padding, of faint noises magnified by sheer numbers. It came in the sound of squeaks and chittering, first as distant echoes, then in closer cacophony as my summons were answered.

Now the yougoslaves had reached the ladder at the far side of the platform. I saw Sandor mount the lower rungs, knife held between clenched teeth—saw him halt as he too heard the sudden, telltale tumult. Behind Sandor his companions turned to seek its source.

They cried out then, first in surprise, then in alarm, as the gray wave surged toward them along the sewer's length; the gray wave, flecked with hundreds of red and glaring eyes, a thousand tiny teeth.

The wave raced forward, curling around the feet and ankles of the yougoslaves before the ladder, climbing and clinging to their legs and knees. Screaming, they lashed out with their weapons, trying to beat back the attack but the wave poured on, forward and upward. Furry forms leaped higher, claws digging into waists, teeth biting into bellies. Sandor pulled himself up the ladder with both hands, but below him the red eyes rose and the gray shapes launched up from behind to cover his unprotected back with a blanket of wriggling bodies.

Now the screams from below were drowned out by the volume of shrill screeching. The knife dropped from between Sandor's lips as he shrieked and toppled down into the writhing mass that had already engulfed his companions. Flailing helplessly, their faces sank from sight in the rising waves of the gray sea.

It happened so quickly that Le Boss, caught by surprise, could only stare in stunned silence at the shambles below.

It was I whose voice rose above the bedlam. "The key," I cried. "Give me the key."

For answer he raised his hand—not the one holding the key, but the one grasping the gun.

His fingers were trembling, and the muzzle wavered as I started toward him. Even so, at such close range I realized he couldn't miss. And he didn't.

As he squeezed the trigger the shots came in rapid succession. They

were barely audible in the uproar from the tunnel, but I felt their impact as they struck my chest and torso.

I kept on, moving closer, hearing the final, futile click as he continued to press the trigger of his emptied revolver. Looking up, eyes red with rage, he hurled the weapon at my head. It whizzed past me, and now he had nothing left to clutch but the key. His hands started to shake.

My hand went out.

Snatching the key from his pudgy paw, I stared at his frantic face. Perhaps I should have told him he'd guessed correctly, the key was not meant to open a gate. I could have explained the ruby in the crest—the symbol of a lineage so ancient that it still adhered to the old custom of maintaining a tomb on the estate. The key gave me access to that tomb, not that it was really needed; my branch of the line had other resting places, and during my travels I always carried with me what was necessary to afford temporary rest of my own. But during my stay here the tomb was both practical and private. Calling a locksmith would be unwise and inconvenient, and I do not relish inconvenience.

All this I could have told him, and much more. Instead I pocketed the key bearing the great flawed ruby that was like a single drop of blood.

As I did so, I realized that the squeals and chittering below had faded into other sounds compounded of claws ripping through cloth, teeth grating against bone.

Unable to speak, unable to move, Le Boss awaited my approach. When I gripped his shoulders he must have fainted, for there was only a dead weight now to ease down onto the platform floor.

Below me my brothers sated their hunger, feasting on the bodies of the yougoslaves.

Bending forward to the fat neck beneath me, in my own way I feasted too.

What fools they were, these creatures who thought themselves so clever! Perhaps they could outwit others, but their little tricks could not prevail against me. After all, they were only yougoslaves.

And I am a Transylvanian.



## Tight Little Stitches in a Dead Man's Back

Joe R. Lansdale

*Born in Gladewater, Texas in 1951, Joe R. Lansdale is one of a group of popular writers for small press publications who are beginning to stake a claim in professional ranks. Currently a resident of Nacogdoches, Texas, Lansdale says that he managed two years of college over about four years in three different schools, including the University of Texas at Austin, and that he has been a martial artist, farmer, factory worker, janitor, and worked at numerous other of the sort of odd jobs determined writers seem to bounce through. Since 1981, Lansdale has been writing full time, and he is now editing anthologies as well. He has sold over a hundred short stories, and his books include Act of Love, Dead in the West, The Magic Wagon, Nightrunners, The Drive-in, and a collection of his short fiction. His anthologies include Best of the West, an as-yet-untitled offbeat Western anthology, and Wild West Show.*

“Tight Little Stitches in a Dead Man’s Back” was first published in the John Maclay anthology, *Nukes*. Joe R. Lansdale is also noted for his use of humor in his stories and articles, but you won’t believe that after reading the following work.

### FROM THE JOURNAL OF PAUL MARDER

(BOOM!)

That’s a little scientist joke, and the proper way to begin this. As for the purpose of this notebook, I’m uncertain. Perhaps to organize my thoughts and not go insane.

No. Probably so I can read it and feel as if I’m being spoken to. Maybe neither of those reasons. It doesn’t matter. I just want to do it, and that is enough.

What’s new?

Well, Mr. Journal, after all these years I’ve taken up martial arts again—or at least the forms and calisthenics of Tae Kwon Do. There is no one to spar with here in the lighthouse, so the forms have to do.

There is Mary, of course, but she keeps all her sparring verbal. And as of late, there is not even that. I long for her to call me a sonofabitch. Anything. Her hatred of me has cured to 100% perfection and she no longer finds it necessary to speak. The tight lines around her eyes and mouth, the emotional heat that radiates from her body like a dreadful cold sore looking for a place to lie down is voice enough for her. She lives only for the moment when she (the cold sore) can attach herself to me with her needles, ink and thread. She lives only for the design on my back.

That's all I live for as well. Mary adds to it nightly and I enjoy the pain. The tattoo is if a great, blue mushroom cloud, and in the cloud, etched ghostlike, is the face of our daughter, Rae. Her lips are drawn tight, eyes are closed and there are stitches deeply pulled to simulate the lashes. When I move fast and hard they rip slightly and Rae cries bloody tears.

That's one reason for the martial arts. The hard practice of them helps me to tear the stitches so my daughter can cry. Tears are the only thing I can give her.

Each night I bare my back eagerly to Mary and her needles. She pokes deep and I moan in pain as she moans in ecstasy and hatred. She adds more color to the design, works with brutal precision to bring Rae's face out in sharper relief. After ten minutes she tires and will work no more. She puts the tools away and I go to the full-length mirror on the wall. The lantern on the shelf flickers like a jack-o-lantern in a high wind, but there is enough light for me to look over my shoulder and examine the tattoo. And it is beautiful. Better each night as Rae's face becomes more and more defined.

*Rae.*

Rae. God, can you forgive me, sweetheart?

But the pain of the needles, wonderful and cleansing as they are, is not enough. So I go sliding, kicking and punching along the walkway around the lighthouse, feeling Rae's red tears running down my spine, gathering in the wasteband of my much-stained canvas pants.

Winded, unable to punch and kick anymore, I walk over to the railing and call down into the dark, "Hungry?"

In response to my voice a chorus of moans rises up to greet me.

Later, I lie on my pallet, hands behind my head, examine the ceiling and try to think of something worthy to write in you, Mr. Journal. So seldom is there anything. Nothing seems truly worthwhile.

Bored of this, I roll on my side and look at the great light that once shone out to the ships, but is now forever snuffed. Then I turn the other direction and look at my wife sleeping on her bunk, her naked ass turned

toward me. I try to remember what it was like to make love to her, but it is difficult. I only remember that I miss it. For a long moment I stare at my wife's ass as if it is a mean mouth about to open and reveal teeth. Then I roll on my back again, stare at the ceiling, and continue this routine until daybreak.

Mornings I greet the flowers, their bright red and yellow blooms bursting from the heads of long-dead bodies that will not rot. The flowers open wide to reveal their little black brains and their feathery feelers, and they lift their blooms upward and moan. I get a wild pleasure out of this. For one crazed moment I feel like a rock singer appearing before his starry-eyed audience.

When I tire of the game I get the binoculars, Mr. Journal, and examine the eastern plains with them, as if I expect a city to materialize there. The most interesting thing I have seen on those plains is a herd of large lizards thundering north. For a moment, I considered calling Mary to see them, but I didn't. The sound of my voice, the sight of my face, upsets her. She loves only the tattoo and is interested in nothing more.

When I finish looking at the plains, I walk to the other side. To the west, where the ocean was, there is now nothing but miles and miles of cracked, black sea bottom. Its only resemblances to a great body of water are the occasional dust storms that blow out of the west like dark tidal waves and wash the windows black at midday. And the creatures. Mostly mutated whales. Monstrously large, sluggish things. Abundant now where once they were near extinction. (Perhaps the whales should form some sort of GREENPEACE organization for humans now. What do you think, Mr. Journal? No need to answer. Just another one of those little scientist jokes.)

These whales crawl across the sea bottom near the lighthouse from time to time, and if the mood strikes them, they rise on their tails and push their heads near the tower and examine it. I keep expecting one to flop down on us, crushing us like bugs. But no such luck. For some unknown reason the whales never leave the cracked sea bed to venture onto what we formerly called the shore. It's as if they live in invisible water and are bound by it. A racial memory perhaps. Or maybe there's something in that cracked black soil they need. I don't know.

Besides the whales I suppose I should mention I saw a shark once. It was slithering along at a great distance and the tip of its fin was winking in the sunlight. I've also seen some strange, legged fish and some things I could not put a name to. I'll just call them whale food since I saw one of the whales dragging his bottom jaw along the ground one day, scooping up the creatures as they tried to beat a hasty retreat.



Exciting, huh? Well, that's how I spend my day, Mr. Journal. Roaming about the tower with my glasses, coming in to write in you, waiting anxiously for Mary to take told of that kit and give me the signal. The mere thought of it excites me to erection. I suppose you could call that our sex act together.

*And what was I doing the day they dropped The Big One?*

Glad you asked that, Mr. Journal, really I am.

I was doing the usual. Up at six, did the shit, shower and shave routine. Had breakfast. Got dressed. Tied my tie. I remember doing the latter, and not very well, in front of the bedroom mirror, and noticing that I had shaved poorly. A hunk of dark beard decorated my chin like a bruise.

Rushing to the bathroom to remedy that, I opened the door as Rae, naked as the day of her birth, was stepping from the tub.

Surprised, she turned to look at me. An arm went over her breasts, and a hand, like a dove settling into a fiery bush, covered her pubic area.

Embarrassed, I closed the door with an "excuse me" and went about my business—unshaved. It was an innocent thing. An accident. Nothing sexual. But when I think of her now, more often than not, that is the first image that comes to mind. I guess it was the moment I realized my baby had grown into a beautiful woman.

That was also the day she went off to her first day of college and got to see, ever so briefly, the end of the world.

And it was the day the triangle—Mary, Rae and myself—shattered.

If my first memory of Rae alone is that day, naked in the bathroom, my foremost memory of us as a family is when Rae was six. We used to go to the park and she would ride the merry-go-round, swing, teeter-totter, and finally my back. ("I want to piggy, Daddy.") We would gallop about until my legs were rubber, then we would stop at the bench where Mary sat waiting. I would turn my back to the bench so Mary could take Rae down, but always before she did, she would reach around from behind, caressing Rae, pushing her tight against my back, and Mary's hands would touch my chest.

God, but if I could describe those hands. She still has hands like that, after all these years. I feel them fluttering against my back when she works. They are long and sleek and artistic. Naturally soft, like the belly of a baby rabbit. And when she held Rae and me that way, I felt that no matter what happened in the world, we three could stand against it and conquer.

But now the triangle is broken and the geometry gone away.

So the day Rae went off to college and was fucked into oblivion by the

dark, pelvic thrust of the bomb, Mary drove me to work. Me, Paul Marder, big shot with The Crew. One of the finest, brightest young minds in the industry. Always teaching, inventing and improving on our nuclear threat, because, as we often joked, "We cared enough to send only the very best."

When we arrived at the guard booth, I had out my pass, but there was no one to take it. Beyond the chain-link gate there was a wild melee of people running, screaming, falling down.

I got out of the car and ran to the gate. I called out to a man I knew as he ran by. When he turned his eyes were wild and his lips were flecked with foam. "The missiles are flying," he said, then he was gone, running madly.

I jumped in the car, pushed Mary aside and stomped the gas. The Buick leaped into the fence, knocking it asunder. The car spun, slammed into the edge of a building and went dead. I grabbed Mary's hand, pulled her from the car and we ran toward the great elevators. We made one just in time. There were others running for it as the door closed, and the elevator went down. I still remember the echo of their fists on the metal just as it began to drop. It was like the rapid heartbeat of something dying.

And so the elevator took us to the world of Down Under and we locked it off. There we were in a five-mile layered city designed not only as a massive office and laboratory, but as an impenetrable shelter. It was our special reward for creating the poisons of war. There was food, water, medical supplies, films, books, you name it. Enough to last two thousand people for a hundred years. Of the two thousand it was designed for, perhaps eleven hundred made it. The others didn't run fast enough from the parking lot or the other buildings, or they were late for work, or maybe they had called in sick.

Perhaps they were the lucky ones. They might have died in their sleep. Or while they were having a morning quickie with the spouse. Or perhaps as they lingered over that last cup of coffee.

Because you see, Mr. Journal, Down Under was no paradise. Before long suicides were epidemic. I considered it myself from time to time. People slashed their throats, drank acid, took pills. It was not unusual to come out of your cubicle in the morning and find people dangling from pipes and rafters like ripe fruit.

There were also the murders. Most of them performed by a crazed group who lived in the deeper recesses of the unit and called themselves the Shit Faces. From time to time they smeared dung on themselves and

ran amok, clubbing men, women, and children born Down Under, to death. It was rumored they ate human flesh.

We had a police force of sorts, but it didn't do much. It didn't have much sense of authority. Worse, we all viewed ourselves as deserving victims. Except for Mary, we had all helped to blow up the world.

Mary came to hate me. She came to the conclusion I had killed Rae. It was a realization that grew in her like a drip growing and growing until it became a gushing flood of hate. She seldom talked to me. She tacked up a picture of Rae and looked at it most of the time.

Topside she had been an artist, and she took that up again. She rigged a kit of tools and inks and became a tattooist. Everyone came to her for a mark. And though each was different, they all seemed to indicate one thing: I fucked up. I blew up the world. Brand me.

Day in and day out she did her tattoos, having less and less to do with me, pushing herself more and more into this work until she was as skilled with skin and needles as she had been Topside with brush and canvas. And one night, as we lay on our separate pallets, feigning sleep, she said to me, "I just want you to know how much I hate you."

"I know," I said.

"You killed Rae."

"I know."

"You say you killed her, you bastard. Say it."

"I killed her," I said, and meant it.

Next day I asked for my tattoo. I told her of this dream that came to me nightly. There would be darkness, and out of this darkness would come a swirl of glowing clouds, and the clouds would meld into a mushroom shape, and out of that—torpedo-shaped, nose pointing skyward, striding on ridiculous cartoon legs—would step The Bomb.

There was a face painted on The Bomb, and it was my face. And suddenly the dream's point of view would change, and I would be looking out of the eyes of that painted face. Before me was my daughter. Naked. Lying on the ground. Her legs wide apart. Her sex glazed like a wet canyon.

And I/The Bomb, would dive into her, pulling those silly feet after me, and she would scream. I could hear it echo as I plunged through her belly, finally driving myself out of the top of her head, then blowing to terminal orgasm. And the dream would end where it began. A mushroom cloud. Darkness.

When I told Mary the dream and asked her to interpret it in her art, she said, "Bare your back," and that's how the design began. An inch of work at a time—a painful inch. She made sure of that.

Never once did I complain. She'd send the needles home as hard and deep as she could, and though I might moan or cry out, I never asked her to stop. I could feel those fine hands touching my back and I loved it. The needles. The hands. The needles. The hands.

And if that was so much fun, you ask, why did I come Topside?

You ask such probing questions, Mr. Journal. Really you do, and I'm glad you asked that. My telling you will be like a laxative, I hope. Maybe if I just let the shit flow I'll wake up tomorrow and feel a lot better about myself.

Sure. And it will be the dawning of a new Pepsi generation as well. It will have all been a bad dream. The alarm clock will ring, I'll get up, have my bowl of Rice Krispies and tie my tie.

Okay, Mr. Journal. The answer. Twenty years or so after we went Down Under, a fistful of us decided it couldn't be any worse Topside than it was below. We made plans to go see. Simple as that. Mary and I even talked a little. We both entertained the crazed belief that Raw might have survived. She would be thirty-eight. We might have been hiding below like vermin for no reason. It could be a brave new world up there.

I remember thinking these things, Mr. Journal, and half-believing them.

We outfitted two sixty-foot crafts that were used as part of our transportation system Down Under, plugged in the half-remembered codes that opened the elevators, and drove the vehicles inside. The elevator lasers cut through the debris above them and before long we were Topside. The doors opened to sunlight muted by gray-green clouds and a desertlike landscape. Immediately I knew there was no brave new world over the horizon. It had all gone to hell in a fiery handbasket, and all that was left of man's millions of years of development were a few pathetic humans living Down Under like worms, and a few others crawling Topside like the same.

We cruised about a week and finally came to what had once been the Pacific Ocean. Only there wasn't any water now, just that cracked blackness.

We drove along the shore for another week and finally saw life. A whale. Jacobs immediately got the idea to shoot one and taste its meat.

Using a high-powered rifle he killed it, and he and seven others cut slabs off it, brought the meat back to cook. They invited all of us to eat, but the meat looked greenish and there wasn't much blood and we warned him against it. But Jacobs and the others ate it anyway. As Jacobs said, "It's something to do."

A little later on Jacobs threw up blood and his intestines boiled out of his mouth, and not long after those who had shared the meat had the same thing happen to them. They died crawling on their bellies like gutted dogs. There wasn't a thing we could do for them. We couldn't even bury them. The ground was too hard. We stacked them like cordwood along the shoreline and moved camp down a way, tried to remember how remorse felt.

And that night, while we slept as best we could, the roses came.

Now, let me admit, Mr. Journal, I do not actually know how the roses survive, but I have an idea. And since you've agreed to hear my story—and even if you haven't, you're going to anyway—I'm going to put logic and fantasy together and hope to arrive at the truth.

These roses lived in the ocean bed, underground, and at night they came out. Up until then they had survived as parasites of reptiles and animals, but a new food had arrived from Down Under. Humans. Their creators, actually. Looking at it that way, you might say we were the gods who conceived them, and their partaking of our flesh and blood was but a new version of wine and wafer.

I can imagine the pulsating brains pushing up through the sea bottom on thick stalks, extending feathery feelers and tasting the air out there beneath the light of the moon—which through those odd clouds gave the impression of a pus-filled boil—and I can imagine them uprooting and dragging their vines across the ground toward the shore where the corpses lay.

Thick vines sprouted little, thorny vines, and these moved up the bank and touched the corpses. Then, with a lashing motion, the thorns tore into the flesh, and the vines, like snakes, slithered through the wounds and inside. Secreting a dissolving fluid that turned the innards to the consistency of watery oatmeal, they slurped up the mess, and the vines grew and grew at amazing speed, moved and coiled throughout the bodies, replacing nerves and shaping into the symmetry of the muscles they had devoured, and lastly they pushed up through the necks, into the skulls, ate tongues and eyeballs and sucked up the mouse-gray brains like soggy gruel. With an explosion of skull shrapnel, the roses bloomed, their tooth-hard petals expanding into beautiful red and yellow flowers, hunks of human heads dangling from them like shattered watermelon rinds.

In the center of these blooms a fresh, black brain pulsed and feathery feelers once again tasted air for food and breeding grounds. Energy waves from the floral brains shot through the miles and miles of vines

that were knotted inside the bodies, and as they had replaced nerves, muscles and vital organs, they made the bodies stand. Then those corpses turned their flowered heads toward the tents where we slept, and the blooming corpses (another little scientist joke there if you're into English idiom, Mr. Journal) walked, eager to add the rest of us to their animated bouquet.

I saw my first rose-head while I was taking a leak.

I had left the tent and gone down by the shoreline to relieve myself, when I caught sight of it out of the corner of my eye. Because of the bloom I first thought it was Susan Myers. She wore a thick, wooly Afro that surrounded her head like a lion's mane, and the shape of the thing struck me as her silhouette. But when I zipped and turned, it wasn't an Afro. It was a flower blooming out of Jacobs. I recognized him by his clothes and the hunk of his face that hung off one of the petals like a worn-out hat on a peg.

In the center of the blood-red flower was a pulsating sack, and all around it little wormy things squirmed. Directly below the brain was a thin proboscis. It extended toward me like an erect penis. At its tip, just inside the opening, were a number of large thorns.

A sound like a moan came out of that proboscis, and I stumbled back. Jacobs' body quivered briefly, as if he had been besieged by a sudden chill, and ripping through his flesh and clothes, from neck to foot, was a mass of thorny, wagging vines that shot out to five feet in length.

With an almost invisible motion, they waved from west to east, slashed my clothes, tore my hide, knocked my feet out from beneath me. It was like being hit by a cat-o-nine-tails.

Dazed, I rolled onto my hands and knees, bear-walked away from it. The vines whipped against my back and butt, cut deep.

Every time I got to my feet, they tripped me. The thorns not only cut, they burned like hot ice picks. I finally twisted away from a net of vines, slammed through one last shoot, and made a break for it.

Without realizing it, I was running back to the tent. My body felt as if I had been lying on a bed of nails and razor blades. My forearm hurt something terrible where I had used it to lash the thorns away from me. I glanced down at it as I ran. It was covered in blood. A strand of vine about two feet in length was coiled around it like a garter snake. A thorn had torn a deep wound in my arm, and the vine was sliding an end into the wound.

Screaming, I held my forearm in front of me like I had just discovered it. The flesh, where the vine had entered, rippled and made a bulge that

looked like a junkie's favorite vein. The pain was nauseating. I snatched at the vine, ripped it free. The thorns turned against me like fishhooks.

The pain was so much I fell to my knees, but I had the vine out of me. It squirmed in my hand, and I felt a thorn gouge my palm. I threw the vine into the dark. Then I was up and running for the tent again.

The roses must have been at work for quite some time before I saw Jacobs, because when I broke back into camp yelling, I saw Susan, Ralph, Casey and some others, and already their heads were blooming, skulls cracking away like broken model kits.

Jane Calloway was facing a rose-possessed corpse, and the dead body had its hands on her shoulders, and the vines were jetting out of the corpse, weaving around her like a web, tearing, sliding inside her, breaking off. The proboscis poked into her mouth and extended down her throat, forced her head back. The scream she started came out a gurgle.

I tried to help her, but when I got close, the vines whipped at me and I had to jump back. I looked for something to grab, to hit the damn thing with, but there was nothing. When next I looked at Jane, vines were stabbing out of her eyes and her tongue, now nothing more than lava-thick blood, was dripping out of her mouth onto her breasts, which, like the rest of her body, were riddled with stabbing vines.

I ran away then. There was nothing I could do for Jane. I saw others embraced by corpse hands and tangles of vines, but now my only thought was Mary. Our tent was to the rear of the campsite, and I ran there as fast as I could.

She was lumbering out of our tent when I arrived. The sound of screams had awakened her. When she saw me running she froze. By the time I got to her, two vine-riddled corpses were coming upon the tent from the left side. Grabbing her hand I half pulled, half dragged her away from there. I got to one of the vehicles and pushed her inside.

I locked the doors just as Jacobs, Susan, Jane, and others appeared at the windshield, leaning over the rocket-nose hood, the feelers around the brain sacks vibrating like streamers in a high wind. Hands slid greasily down the windshield. Vines flopped and scratched and cracked against it like thin bicycle chains.

I got the vehicle started, stomped the accelerator, and the rose-heads went flying. One of them, Jacobs, bounced over the hood and splattered into a spray of flesh, ichor and petals.

I had never driven the vehicle, so my maneuvering was rusty. But it didn't matter. There wasn't exactly a traffic rush to worry about.

After an hour or so, I turned to look at Mary. She was staring at me,

her eyes like the twin barrels of a double-barreled shotgun. They seemed to say, "More of your doing," and in a way she was right. I drove on.

Daybreak we came to the lighthouse. I don't know how it survived. One of those quirks. Even the glass was unbroken. It looked like a great stone finger shooting us the bird.

The vehicle's tank was near empty, so I assumed here was as good a place to stop as any. At least there was shelter, something we could fortify. Going on until the vehicle was empty of fuel didn't make much sense. There wouldn't be any more fill-ups, and there might not be any more shelter like this.

Mary and I (in our usual silence) unloaded the supplies from the vehicle and put them in the lighthouse. There was enough food, water, chemicals for the chemical toilet, odds and ends, extra clothes, to last us a year. There were also some guns. A Colt .45 revolver, two twelve-gauge shotguns and a .38, and enough shells to fight a small war.

When everything was unloaded, I found some old furniture downstairs, and using tools from the vehicles, tried to barricade the bottom door and the one at the top of the stairs. When I finished, I thought of a line from a story I had once read, a line that always disturbed me. It went something like, "Now we're shut in for the night."

Days. Nights. All the same. Shut in with one another, our memories and the fine tattoo.

A few days later I spotted the roses. It was as if they had smelled us out. And maybe they had. From a distance, through the binoculars, they reminded me of old women in bright sun hats.

It took them the rest of the day to reach the lighthouse, and they immediately surrounded it, and when I appeared at the railing they would lift their heads and moan.

And that, Mr. Journal, brings us up to now.

I thought I had written myself out, Mr. Journal. Told the only part of my life story I would ever tell, but now I'm back. You can't keep a good world destroyer down.

I saw my daughter last night and she's been dead for years. But I saw her, I did, naked, smiling at me, calling to ride piggyback.

Here's what happened.

It was cold last night. Must be getting along winter. I had rolled off my pallet onto the cold floor. Maybe that's what brought me awake. The cold. Or maybe it was just gut instinct.

It had been a particularly wonderful night with the tattoo. The face had been made so clear it seemed to stand out from my back. It had



finally become more defined than the mushroom cloud. The needles went in hard and deep, but I've had them in me so much now I barely feel the pain. After looking in the mirror at the beauty of the design, I went to bed happy, or as happy as I can get.

During the night the eyes ripped open. The stitches came out and I didn't know it until I tried to rise from the cold, stone floor and my back puckered against it where the blood had dried.

I pulled myself free and got up. It was dark, but we had a good moonspill that night and I went to the mirror to look. It was bright enough that I could see Rae's reflection clearly, the color of her face, the color of the cloud. The stitches had fallen away and now the wounds were spread wide, and inside the wounds were eyes. Oh God, Rae's blue eyes. Her mouth smiled at me and her teeth were very white.

Oh, I hear you, Mr. Journal. I hear what you're saying. And I thought of that. My first impression was that I was about six bricks shy a load, gone around the old bend. But I know better now. You see, I lit a candle and held it over my shoulder, and with the candle and the moonlight, I could see even more clearly. It was Rae all right, not just a tattoo.

I looked over at my wife on the bunk, her back to me, as always. She had not moved.

I turned back to the reflection. I could hardly see the outline of myself, just Rae's face smiling out of that cloud.

"Rae," I whispered, "is that you?"

"Come on, Daddy," said the mouth in the mirror, "that's a stupid question. Of course, it's me."

"But . . . You're . . . you're . . ."

"Dead?"

"Yes . . . Did . . . did it hurt much?"

She cackled so loudly the mirror shook. I could feel the hairs on my neck rising. I thought for sure Mary would wake up, but she slept on.

"It was instantaneous, Daddy, and even then, it was the greatest pain imaginable. Let me show you how it hurt."

The candle blew out and I dropped it. I didn't need it anyway. The mirror grew bright and Rae's smile went from ear to ear—literally—and the flesh on her bones seemed like crepe paper before a powerful fan, and that fan blew the hair off her head, the skin off her skull and melted those beautiful, blue eyes and those shiny white teeth of hers to a putrescent goo the color and consistency of fresh bird shit. Then there was only the skull, and it heaved in half and flew backward into the dark world of the mirror and there was no reflection now, only the hurtling

fragments of a life that once was and was now nothing more than swirling cosmic dust.

I closed my eyes and looked away.

"Daddy?"

I opened them, looked over my shoulder into the mirror. There was Rae again, smiling out of my back.

"Darling," I said, "I'm so sorry."

"So are we," she said, and there were faces floating past her in the mirror. Teenagers, children, men and women, babies, little embryos swirling around her head like planets around the sun. I closed my eyes again, but I could not keep them closed. When I opened them the multitudes of swirling dead, and those who had never had a chance to live, were gone. Only Rae was there.

"Come close to the mirror, Daddy."

I backed up to it. I backed until the hot wounds that were Rae's eyes touched the cold glass and the wounds became hotter and hotter and Rae called out, "Ride me piggy, Daddy," and then I felt her weight on my back, not the weight of a six-year-old child or a teenage girl, but a great weight, like the world was on my shoulders and bearing down.

Leaping away from the mirror I went hopping and whooping about the room, same as I used to go in the park. Around and around I went, and as I did, I glanced in the mirror. Astride me was Rae, lithe and naked, her red hair fanning around her as I spun. And when I whirled by the mirror again, I saw that she was six years old. Another spin and there was a skeleton with red hair, one hand held high, the jaws open and yelling, "Ride 'em, cowboy."

"How?" I managed, still bucking and leaping, giving Rae the ride of her life. She bent to my ear and I could feel her warm breath. "You want to know how I'm here, Daddy-dear? I'm here because you created me. Once you laid between Mother's legs and thrust me into existence, the two of you, with all the love there was in you. This time you thrust me into existence with your guilt and Mother's hate. Her thrusting needles, your arching back. And now I've come back for one last ride, Daddy-o. Ride, you bastard, ride."

All the while I had been spinning, and now as I glimpsed the mirror, I saw wall to wall faces, weaving in, weaving out, like smiling stars, and all those smiles opened wide and words came out in chorus, "Where were you when they dropped The Big One?"

Each time I spun and saw the mirror again, it was a new scene. Great flaming winds scorching across the world, babies turning to fleshy jello, heaps of charred bones, brains boiling out of the heads of men and

women like backed up toilets overflowing, The Almighty, Glory Hallelujah, Ours Is Bigger Than Yours Bomb hurtling forward, the mirror going mushroom white, then clear, and me, spinning, Rae pressed tight against my back, melting like butter on a griddle, evaporating into the eye wounds on my back, and finally me alone, collapsing to the floor beneath the weight of the world.

Mary never awoke.

The vines outsmarted me.

A single strand found a crack downstairs somewhere and wound up the steps and slipped beneath the door that led into the tower. Mary's bunk was not far from the door, and in the night, while I slept and later while I spun in front of the mirror and lay on the floor before it, it made its way to Mary's bunk, up between her legs, and entered her sex effortlessly.

I suppose I should give the vine credit for doing what I had not been able to do in years, Mr. Journal, and that's enter Mary. Oh God, that's a funny one, Mr. Journal. Real funny. Another little scientist joke. Let's make that a mad scientist joke, what say? Who but a madman would play with the lives of human beings by constantly trying to build the bigger and better boom machine?

So what of Rae, you ask?

I'll tell you. She is inside me. My back feels the weight. She twists in my guts like a corkscrew. I went to the mirror a moment ago, and the tattoo no longer looks like it did. The eyes have turned to crusty sores and the entire face looks like a scab. It's as if the bile that made up my soul, unthinking, nearsightedness, the guilt that I am, has festered from inside and spoiled the picture with pustule bumps, knots and scabs.

To put it in layman's terms, Mr. Journal, my back is infected. Infected with what I am. A blind, senseless fool.

The wife?

Ah, the wife. God, how I loved that woman. I have not really touched her in years, merely felt those wonderful hands on my back as she jabbed the needles home, but I never stopped loving her. It was not a love that glowed anymore, but it was there, though hers for me was long gone and wasted.

This morning when I got up from the floor, the weight of Rae and the world on my back, I saw the vine coming up from beneath the door and stretching over to her. I yelled her name. She did not move. I ran to her and saw it was too late. Before I could put a hand on her, I saw her flesh

ripple and bump up, like a den of mice were nesting under a quilt. The vines were at work. (Out goes the old guts, in goes the new vines.)

There was nothing I could do for her.

I made a torch out of a chair leg and an old quilt, set fire it it, burned the vine from between her legs, watched it retreat, smoking, under the door. Then I got a board, nailed it along the bottom, hoping it would keep others out for at least a little while. I got one of the twelve-gauges and loaded it. It's on the desk beside me, Mr. Journal, but even I know I'll never use it. It was just something to do, as Jacobs said when he killed and ate the whale. Something to do.

I can hardly write anymore. My back and shoulders hurt so bad. It's the weight of Rae and the world.

I've just come back from the mirror and there is very little left of the tattoo. Some blue and black ink, a touch of red that was Rae's hair. It looks like an abstract painting now. Collapsed design, running colors. It's real swollen. I look like the hunchback of Notre Dame.

What am I going to do, Mr. Journal?

Well, as always, I'm glad you asked that. You see, I've thought this out.

I could throw Mary's body over the railing before it blooms. I could do that. Then I could doctor my back. It might even heal, though I doubt it. Rae wouldn't let that happen, I can tell you now. And I don't blame her. I'm on her side. I'm just a walking dead man and have been for years.

I could put the shotgun under my chin and work the trigger with my toe, or maybe push it with the very pen I'm using to create you, Mr. Journal. Wouldn't that be neat? Blow my brains to the ceiling and sprinkle you with my blood.

But as I said, I loaded the gun because it was something to do. I'd never use it on myself or Mary.

You see, I want Mary. I want her to hold Rae and me one last time like she used to in the park. And she can. There's a way.

I've drawn all the curtains and made curtains out of blankets for those spots where there aren't any. It'll be sunup soon and I don't want that kind of light in here. I'm writing this by candlelight and it gives the entire room a warm glow. I wish I had wine. I want the atmosphere to be just right.

Over on Mary's bunk she's starting to twitch. Her neck is swollen where the vines have congested and are writhing toward their favorite morsel, the brain. Pretty soon the rose will bloom (I hope she's one of the bright yellow ones, yellow was her favorite color and she wore it well) and Mary will come for me.

When she does, I'll stand with my naked back to her. The vines will whip out and cut me before she reaches me, but I can stand it. I'm used to pain. I'll pretend the thorns are Mary's needles. I'll stand that way until she folds her dead arms around me and her body pushes up against the wound she made in my back, the wound that is our daughter Rae. She'll hold me so the vines and the proboscis can do their work. And while she holds me, I'll grab her fine hands and push them against my chest, and it will be we three again, standing against the world, and I'll close my eyes and delight in her soft, soft hands one last time.

## Apples

### Ramsey Campbell

*Born in Liverpool on January 4, 1946, Ramsey Campbell may have been bitten by the same bat that nipped Robert Bloch thirty years earlier, inasmuch as Campbell also fell under the spell of H.P. Lovecraft as a teenager. He was 18 when his first book was published by Arkham House—a collection of Lovecraftian stories entitled The Inhabitant of the Lake & Less Welcome Tenants. Like Bloch, Campbell soon went on to establish his own particular brand of contemporary horror—often utilizing Liverpool settings—and, again like Bloch, often presented from the viewpoint of an unbalanced observer. Campbell's fiction seems to blend urban paranoia, childhood terrors, and repressed sexual conflicts into an unnerving mixture that is not what the general public wants to confront in a read-it-on-the-train, mass market horror novel.*

*Despite this handicap, Campbell's books have done rather well in recent years. His latest novels include Obsession, Hungry Moon, Incarnate, and The Influence, as well as the collections, Cold Print and Scared Stiff. He is currently working on another novel, tentatively titled The Dead Hunt. Campbell's original titles are often changed upon publication; thus Blind Dark became Hungry Moon, For the Rest of Their Lives became Obsession, The Revelations of Glaaki became Cold Print, while the American edition of To Wake the Dead was retitled The Parasite. A British collection, supposedly entitled The Best of Ramsey Campbell, is set for 1987. Considering that Ramsey Campbell has had at least one story in all but one volume of The Year's Best Horror Stories, one need look no further for stories to fill such a book.*

WE WANTED to be scared on Halloween, but not like that. We never meant anything to happen to Andrew. We only wanted him not to be so useless and show us he could do something he was scared of doing. I know I was scared the night I went to the allotments when Mr. Gray was still alive.

We used to watch him from Colin's window in the tenements, me and Andrew and Colin and Colin's little sister, Jill. Sometimes he worked in

his allotment until midnight, my mum once said. The big lamps on the paths through the estate made his face look like a big white candle with a long nose that was melting. Jill kept shouting "Mr. Toad" and shutting the window quick, but he never looked up. Only he must have known it was us and that's why he said we took his apples when kids from the other end of the estate did really.

He took our mums and dads to see how they'd broken his hedge because he'd locked his gate. "If Harry says he didn't do it, then he didn't," my dad said and Colin's, who was a wrestler, said, "If I find out who's been up to no good they'll be walking funny for a while." But Andrew's mum only said, "I just hope you weren't mixed up in this, Andrew." His dad and mum were like that, they were teachers and tried to make him friends at our school they taught at, boys who didn't like getting dirty and always had combs and handkerchiefs. So then whenever we were cycling round the paths by the allotments and Mr. Gray saw us he said things like, "There are the children who can't keep their hands off other people's property," to anyone who was passing. So one night Colin pinched four apples off his tree, and then it was my turn.

I had to wait for a night my mum sent me to the shop. The woman isn't supposed to sell kids cigarettes, but she does because she knows my mum. I came back past the allotments and when I got to Mr. Gray's I ducked down behind the hedge.

The lamps that were supposed to stop people being mugged turned everything gray in the allotments and made Mr. Gray's windows look as if they had metal shutters on. I could hear my heart jumping. I went to where the hedge was low and climbed over.

He'd put broken glass under the hedge. I managed to land on tiptoe in between the bits of glass. I hated him then, and I didn't even bother taking apples from where he mightn't notice, I just pulled some off and threw them over the hedge for the worms to eat. We wouldn't have eaten them, all his apples tasted old and bitter. I gave my mum her cigarettes and went up to Colin's and told Andrew, "Your turn next."

He started hugging himself. "I can't. My parents might know."

"They said we were stealing, as good as said it," Jill said. "They probably thought you were. My dad said he'd pull their heads off and stick them you-know-where if he thought that's what they meant about us."

"You've got to go," Colin said. "Harry went and he's not even eleven. Go now if you like before my mum and dad come back from the pub."

Andrew might have thought Colin meant to make him, because he started shaking and saying, "No I won't," and then there was a stain on

the front of his trousers. "Look at the baby weeing himself," Colin and Jill said.

I felt sorry for him. "Maybe he doesn't feel well. He can go another night."

"I'll go if he won't," Jill said.

"You wouldn't let a girl go, would you?" Colin said to Andrew, but then their mum and dad came back. Andrew ran upstairs and Colin said to Jill, "You really would have gone too, wouldn't you?"

"I'm still going." She was so cross she went red. "I'm just as brave as you two, braver." And we couldn't stop her the next night, when her mum was watching Jill's dad at work being the Hooded Gouger.

I thought she'd be safe. There'd been a storm in the night and the wind could have blown down the apples. But I was scared when I saw how small she looked down there on the path under the lamps, and I'd never noticed how long it took to walk to the allotments, all that way she might have to run back. Her shadow kept disappearing as if something was squashing it and then it jumped in front of her. We couldn't see in Mr. Gray's windows for the lamps.

When she squatted down behind Mr. Gray's hedge, Andrew said, "Looks like she's been taken short," to try to sound like us, but Colin just glared at him. She threw her coat on the broken glass, then she got over the hedge and ran to the tree. The branches were too high for her. "Leave it," Colin said, but she couldn't have heard him, because she started climbing. She was halfway up when Mr. Gray came out of his house.

He'd got a pair of garden shears. He grinned when he saw Jill, because even all that far away we could see his teeth. He ran round to where the hedge was low. He couldn't really run, it was like a fat old white dog trying, but there wasn't anywhere else for Jill to climb the hedge. Colin ran out, and I was going to open the window and shout at Mr. Gray when he climbed over the hedge to get Jill.

He was clicking the shears. I could see the blades flash. Andrew wet himself and ran upstairs, and I couldn't open the window or even move. Jill jumped off the tree and hurt her ankles, and when she tried to get away from him she was nearly as slow as he was. But she ran to the gate and tried to climb it, only it fell over. Mr. Gray ran after her waving the shears when she tried to crawl away, and then he grabbed his chest like they do in films when they're shot, and fell into the hedge.

Colin ran to Jill and brought her back, and all that time Mr. Gray didn't move. Jill was shaking but she never cried, only shouted through the window at Mr. Gray. "That'll teach you," she shouted, even when Colin



said, "I think he's dead." We were glad until we remembered Jill's coat was down there on the glass.

I went down though my chest was hurting. Mr. Gray was leaning over the hedge with his hands hanging down as if he was trying to reach the shears that had fallen standing up in the earth. His eyes were open with the lamps in them and looking straight at Jill's coat. He looked as if he'd gone bad somehow, as if he'd go all out of shape if you poked him. I grabbed Jill's coat, and just then the hedge creaked and he leaned forward as if he was trying to reach me. I ran away and didn't look back, because I was sure that even though he was leaning farther his head was up so he could keep watching me.

I didn't sleep much that night and I don't think the others did. I kept getting up to see if he'd moved, because I kept thinking he was creeping up on the tenements. He was always still in the hedge, until I fell asleep, and when I looked again he wasn't there. The ambulance must have taken him away, but I couldn't get to sleep for thinking I could hear him on the stairs.

Next night my mum and dad were talking about how some woman found him dead in the hedge and the police went into his house. My mum said the police found a whole bedroom full of rotten fruit, and some books in his room about kids. Maybe he didn't like kids because he was afraid what he might do them, she said, but that was all she'd say.

Colin and me dared each other to look in his windows and Jill went too. All we could see was rooms with nothing in them now except sunlight making them look dusty. I could smell rotten fruit and I kept thinking Mr. Gray was going to open one of the doors and show us his face gone bad. We went to see how many apples were left on his tree, only we didn't go in the allotment because when I looked at the house I saw a patch on one of the windows as if someone had wiped it clean to watch us. Jill said it hadn't been there before we'd gone to the hedge. We stayed away after that, and every night when I looked out of my room the patch was like a white face watching from his window.

Then someone else moved into his house and by the time the clocks went back and it got dark an hour earlier, we'd forgotten about Mr. Gray, at least Colin and Jill and me had. It was nearly Halloween and then a week to Guy Fawkes Night. Colin was going to get some zombie videos to watch on Halloween because his mum and dad would be at the wrestling, but then Andrew's mum found out. Andrew came and told us he was having a Halloween party instead. "If you don't come there won't be anyone," he said.

"All right, we'll come," Colin said, but Jill said, "Andrew's just too

scared to watch the zombies. I expect they make him think of Mr. Toad. He's scared of Mr. Toad even now he's dead."

Andrew got red and stamped his foot. "You wait," he said.

The day before Halloween, I saw him hanging round near Mr. Gray's allotment when it was getting dark. He turned away when I saw him, pretending he wasn't there. Later I heard him go upstairs slowly as if he was carrying something, and I nearly ran out to catch him and make him go red.

I watched telly until my mum told me to go to bed three times. Andrew always went to bed as soon as his mum came home from night school. I went to draw my curtains and I saw someone in Mr. Gray's allotment, bending down under the apple tree as if he was looking for something. He was bending down so far I thought he was digging his face in the earth. When he got up his face looked too white under the lamps, except for his mouth that was messy and black. I pulled the curtains and jumped into bed in case he saw me, but I think he was looking at Andrew's window.

Next day at school Andrew bought Colin and Jill and me sweets. He must have been making sure we went to his party. "Where'd you get all that money?" Jill wanted to know.

"Mummy gave it to me to buy apples," Andrew said and started looking round as if he was scared someone could hear him.

He wouldn't walk home past Mr. Gray's. He didn't know I wasn't going very near after what I'd seen in the allotment. He went the long way round behind the tenements. I got worried when I didn't hear him come in and I went down in case some big kids had done him. He was hiding under the bonfire we'd all built behind the tenements for Guy Fawkes Night. He wouldn't tell me who he was hiding from. He nearly screamed when I looked in at him in the tunnel he'd made under there.

"Don't go if you don't want to," my mum said because I took so long over my tea. "I better had," I said, but I waited until Andrew came to find out if we were ever going, then we all went up together. It wasn't his party we minded so much as his mum and dad telling us what to do.

The first thing his dad said when we went in was "Wipe your feet," though we hadn't come from outside. It was only him there, because Andrew's mum was going to come back soon so he could go to a meeting. Then he started talking in the kind of voice teachers put on just before the holidays to make you forget they're teachers. "I expect your friends would like a Halloween treat," he said and got some baked potatoes out of the oven, but only Andrew had much. I'd just eaten and, besides, the

smell of apples kept getting into the taste of the potatoes and making me feel funny.

There were apples hanging from a rope across the room and floating in a washing-up bowl full of water on some towels on the floor. "If that's the best your friends can do with my Halloween cuisine I think it's about time for games," Andrew's dad said and took our plates away, grouching like a school dinner lady. When he came back, Andrew said, "Please may you tie my hands."

"I don't know about that, son." But Andrew gave him a handkerchief to tie them with and looked as if he was going to cry, so his dad said, "Hold them out, then."

"No, behind my back."

"I don't think your mother would permit that." Then he must have seen how Andrew wanted to be brave in front of us, so he made a face and tied them. "I hope your friends have handkerchiefs too," he said.

He tied our hands behind our backs, wrinkling his nose at Jill's handkerchief, and we let him for Andrew's sake. "Now the point of the game is to bring down an apple by biting it," he said, as if we couldn't see why the apples were hanging up. Only I wished he wouldn't go on about it because talking about them seemed to make the smell stronger.

Jill couldn't quite reach. When he held her up she kept bumping the apple with her nose and said a bad word when the apple came back and hit her. He put her down then quick and Colin had a go. His mouth was almost as big as one of the apples, and he took a bite first time, then he spat it out on the floor. "What on earth do you think you're doing? Would you do that at home?" Andrew's dad shouted, back to being a teacher again, and went to get a dustpan and a mop.

"Where did you get them apples?" Colin said to Andrew. Andrew looked at him to beg him not to ask in front of his dad, and we all knew. I remembered not noticing there weren't any apples on Mr. Gray's tree any more. We could see Andrew was trying to show us he wasn't scared, only he had to wait until his mum or dad was there. When his dad finished clearing up after Colin, Andrew said, "Let's have duck-apples now."

He knelt down by the bowl of water and leaned his head in. He kept his face in the water so long I thought he was looking at something and his dad went to him in case he couldn't get up. He pulled his face out spluttering and I went next, though I didn't like how nervous he looked now.

I wished I hadn't. The water smelled stale and tasted worse. Whenever I tried to pick up an apple with just my mouth without biting into it, it

sank and then bobbed up, and I couldn't see it properly. I didn't like not being able to see the bottom of the bowl. I had another go at an apple so I could get away, but Andrew's dad or someone must have stood over me, because the water got darker and I thought the apple bobbing up was bigger than my head and looking at me. I felt as if someone was holding my head down in the water and I couldn't breathe. I tried to knock the bowl over and spilled a bit of water on the towels. Andrew's dad hauled me out of the bowl as if I was a dog. "I think we'll dispense with the duck-apples," he said, and then the doorbell rang.

"That must be your mother without her keys again," he told Andrew, sounding relieved. "Just don't touch anything until one of us is here." He went down and we heard the door slam and then someone coming up. It wasn't him, the footsteps were too slow and loud. I kept tasting the appley water and feeling I was going to be sick. The footsteps took so long I thought I wouldn't be able to look when they came in. The door opened and Jill screamed, because there was someone wearing a dirty sheet and a skull for a face. "It's only Mummy," Andrew said, laughing at Jill for being scared. "She said she might dress up."

Just then the doorbell rang again and made us all jump. Andrew's mum closed the door of the flat as if the bell wasn't even ringing. "It must be children," Andrew said, looking proud of himself because he was talking for his mother. Jill was mad at him for laughing at her. "I want to duck for apples," she said, even though the smell was stronger and rottener. "I didn't have a go."

Andrew's mum nodded and went round making sure our hands were tied properly, then she pushed Jill to the bowl without taking her hands from under the sheet. Jill looked at her to tell her she didn't care if she wanted to pretend that much, Jill wasn't scared. The bell rang again for a long time but we all ignored it. Jill bent over the bowl and Andrew's mum leaned over her. The way she was leaning I thought she was going to hold Jill down, except Jill dodged out of the way. "There's something in there," she said.

"There's only apples," Andrew said. "I didn't think you'd be scared." Jill looked as if she'd have hit him if she'd been able to get her hands from behind her back. "I want to try the apples hanging up again," she said. "I didn't have a proper go."

She went under the rope and tried to jump high enough to get an apple, and then something tapped on the window. She nearly fell down, and even Colin looked scared. I know I was, because I thought someone had climbed up to the third floor to knock on the window. I thought Mr.

Gray had. But Andrew grinned at us because his mum was there and said, "It's just those children again throwing stones."

His mum picked Jill up and Jill got the apple first time. She bit into it just as more stones hit the window, and then we heard Andrew's dad shouting outside. "It's me, Andrew. Let me in. Some damn fool locked me out when I went down."

Jill made a noise as if she was trying to scream. She'd spat out the apple and goggled at it on the floor. Something was squirming in it. I couldn't move and Colin couldn't either, because Andrew's mum's hands had come out from under the sheet to hold Jill. Only they were white and dirty, and they didn't look like any woman's hands. They didn't look much like hands at all.

Then both the arms came worming out from under the sheet to hold Jill so she couldn't move any more than Colin and me could, and the head started shaking to get the mask off. I'd have done anything rather than see underneath, the arms looked melted enough. All we could hear was the rubber mask creaking and something flopping round inside it, and the drip on the carpet from Andrew wetting himself. But suddenly Andrew squeaked, the best he could do for talking. "You leave her alone. She didn't take your apples, I did. You come and get me."

The mask slipped as if him under the sheet was putting his head on one side, then the arms dropped Jill and reached out for Andrew. Andrew ran to the door and we saw he'd got his hands free. He ran onto the stairs saying, "Come on, you fat old toad, try and catch me."

Him under the sheet went after him and we heard them running down, Andrew's footsteps and the others that sounded bare and squelchy. Me and Colin ran to Jill when we could move to see if she was all right apart from being sick on the carpet. When I saw she was, I ran down fast so that I wouldn't think about it, to find Andrew.

I heard his dad shouting at him behind the tenements. "Did you do this? What's got into you?" Andrew had got matches from somewhere and set light to the bonfire. His dad didn't see anything else, but I did, a sheet and something jumping about inside it, under all that fire. Andrew must have crawled through the tunnel he'd made but him in the sheet had got stuck. I watched the sheet flopping about when the flames got to it, then it stopped moving when the tunnel caved in on it. "Come upstairs, I want a few words with you," Andrew's dad said, pulling him by his ear. But when we got in the building he let go and just gaped, because Andrew's hair had gone dead white.

## Dead White Women

William F. Wu

*William F. Wu's first published short story, "By the Flicker of the One-Eyed Flame," sold in 1975, was adapted and performed on stage by East/West Players of Los Angeles in 1977. His more recent fantasy story, "Wong's Lost and Found Emporium," was adapted into an episode of the new Twilight Zone television series in 1985. At latest count Wu has sold over twenty pieces of short fiction, appearing in such magazines as Omni, Analog, Amazing, Twilight Zone Magazine, and Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, in addition to various anthologies. His first novel, MasterPlay, was published this year by Questar, and his second novel, The Cyborg, is set for later this year.*

*Born in Kansas City, Missouri in 1951, Wu holds a Ph.D. in American Culture from the University of Michigan. After a stay in the Los Angeles area, he has recently moved to Kansas. "Dead White Women" was first published in the Kansas small press magazine, Eldritch Tales. Just when you thought it was safe. . . .*

THE MAGIC OF the soul was affection and hate, theirs and mine. They liked me and I didn't hate them. So their deaths were ordained somewhere in the blue-eyed world of silly old tunes and sentimental nonsense.

Death Angel, can you hear me?

Cyn was eighteen, like me, all mush on the inside and soft 'n' squishy on the outside. She was less than five feet tall and from a distance she looked like a basketball with two bowling balls stuck on the front. She had short brown hair. I had known her for years and thought our going out together would be pleasant, but no big deal. On a muggy midwestern summer night, I pulled my daddy's car up to the front of her family's house.

Their front yard was mostly bluegrass, with a patch of thick brown zoisia in one corner away from the driveway. The earth smelled damp and fresh; it was no night to go barefoot unless you wanted to feel

smashed slugs oozing up between your toes. Cyn was the same consistency, but she held together pretty well.

I stood on the porch under a bright white light. After I knocked, I listened to the footsteps inside and waited while a shadow darkened the little peep-hole in the door. I survived the scrutiny, being a rather scrawny plain-looking slant-eyed kid from the high school who was expected anyway, and Cyn's mother opened the door.

Cyn's mother had the same height and build as her daughter, plus a surprisingly cute face that resembled the front of the Roman war galley in "Ben Hur."

"Hello, Hello, come in. How are you? Cyn will be ready in just a minute. This way, sit down."

"Hi. Okay." I followed her into the living room, walking with my hands in my pockets. The place was small and warm and cozy, with a plush carpet and well-polished wooden lamp tables. The easy chair and the couch were all soft and padded, like Cyn and her mother. I sat down on the couch, grinning fatuously, and looked up at her.

She looked back, grinning just as idiotically, with her hands folded in front of her. "I think it's just so nice you two are going out. Oh, here's Cyn's daddy. Daddy, this is John."

I stood up, as a solid stocky man with a crew cut and a scowl came in from the dining room. He stuck a smokeless pipe between his teeth, faked a smile, and stuck out his hand.

"How do you do, John." He made a faint attempt at sounding hearty.

"Hi," I muttered, trying not to wince as he crushed the bones in my hand and then twisted the wreckage back and forth a few times experimentally. "Uh, fine—thanks."

He promptly lost interest and turned to switch on a big console color tv. With his eyes fixed on the shifting images on the screen, he backed up slowly until he hit the couch and then allowed himself to fall backward onto it. I stuck the remains of my hand back into my pocket.

His wife smiled and shrugged. "Don't mind him. He used to kill Japs in the Pacific."

"Oh," I said. "Of course."

Cyn came rolling down the hall, smiling nicely. "I know, I know, I'm always late. Shall we go?"

"Guess we better," I said. "Bye."

"Midnight," said Cyn's mother, poking her daughter's shoulder with an index finger. The finger sank in up to the first knuckle, like when you check the water for cooking rice.

"I know, I know." Cyn took my arm and we walked across the lawn.

"We're still in time for the movie," I said.

"Ugh, look at the slug's," said Cyn. "Oh, yuck."

We went to see "Walk Like a Dragon," starring Jack Lord. James Shigeta and Mobu McCarthy played Chinese immigrants in the Old West, like my ancestors had been. Shigeta wins the girl but loses the gunfight. Anyway, it was the first time I'd seen a Chinese guy wear a queue and a gun and speak regular English in a movie.

"Hope your father doesn't see this," I said at the end. "He might get trigger-happy."

"That's dumb. Besides, these people in the movies are Chinese."

"No, they aren't. The actors, I mean. They're Japanese Americans. Besides, it wouldn't matter to him."

"Oh. Well, you're right; it wouldn't."

I took her to Allen's Drive-In, where we sat in the car. She ordered a chocolate shake. I had a double cheeseburger, fries, a root beer, and later asked for a piece of cheesecake.

"Why aren't you fat?" Cyn asked me.

"Mmm." I had a mouthful of food.

"Nobody ever asks me out," said Cyn.

When I could talk, I said, "I never ask anybody out."

"Isn't it nice? We belong together."

Warning bells went off in my head, but before I could puke, she threw her arms around me. I went down hard and stayed pinned until the waitress arrived with the cheesecake. Then I sat up, paid, and floored the accelerator. My daddy's car wouldn't lay rubber; instead, it backfired twice and stalled out. Even so, Cyn retreated and I headed for her house.

What did I know? I had thought we would be two old friends going out for a pleasant evening. We had been casual friends for several years in school; how would I know that showing up after dinner meant I was a gentleman caller? I thought I was John Chinaman, local nerd. In fact, I was. Only now I was a nerd with a girlfriend.

We went out three more times. She spent most of the time talking about how far she would let me go, constantly trying to get me to go for the minimum. I was too disappointed, finding that an old friend had suddenly started leaving her brains at home whenever we got together. Besides, two thoughts kept occurring to me: her father killed Japs and when white women liked slanted eyes, white women die.

On our fourth date, I succumbed like the nerd I was. I had picked up this cheapie little ring and was going to give it to her. Since I didn't know how to get rid of her, I figured I might as well do what she wanted.

We were sitting in the front seat of the car in the parking lot of my



grade school. Tall trees hid one corner of it from the street, making it one of the very few spots where cops did not check parked cars with their flashlights. I waited as late as I could.

“Well,” I said, “would you, uh, be interested in a little, real cheapie ring?”

“Sure!” She brightened so much, I felt guilty.

“Here,” I said.

“Ooh.” She took it and stuck it onto her little finger. It went past the first knuckle, but not the second. She had to take it off again. “I love it. Thank you, you’re wonderful.”

I got a hug and a kiss while I started the car. At the stroke of twelve, my daddy’s car failed one more time, turning into a pumpkin. Or else it was killed by the jolts it took trying to cross a set of railroad tracks.

“Get out. Better get a two truck, quick,” I said. “Hurry.”

We both jumped out and started on foot. The vibration in the ground was subtle at first, and we kept walking. Then the earth began to shake, and the rumble of a train was unmistakable. I hustled her farther down the road; the car was doomed. We turned to watch.

“Oh, no,” she cried. “I left the ring in the car!” She started to run back.

“Wait. Wait. Wait!”

She went running back, bobbing and waddling faster than I had ever thought she could. I was running flat out behind her, and gaining, but she was already at the car. Ahead of me, she yanked open the passenger door and threw herself inside. A deadly white light illuminated the whole scene and a great booming sepulchral note from the train sailed across the sky in harmonious company with the rhythmic rumbling of the tracks. The huge diesel smashed into the car and sent chunks flying in all directions.

I felt sick. That night, the next day, at the funeral, for months after, I felt very sick. I had not known her very well—eighteen-year-olds rarely know each other *very* well—and I hadn’t liked her much lately. But I was sick.

*I want my baby back.*

Then for a while I walked around feeling tough. I had survived the accidental death of a girlfriend, and that seemed tragically romantic. Next I decided that I had grown up from this experience, but I hadn’t, especially. Just a little, to an ordinary extent for such an event. Then I got well.

Blue Eyes was coming to me, from out of the skies on flight something-or-other—but that was just a nickname

Ann's eyes were a striking blue that set off her huge frizzy triangle of red-orange hair. The freckles were a bonus.

Ann was no accident. I went after her deliberately in college, being only half a nerd now. She thought I acted silly but cute, like a puppy.

I was sitting in one of the lounges in the dormitory. The place was jammed with all the dateless and homeless flotsam of a Saturday night, scruffy and loud and not very drunk. Laughing, hairy, barefoot students tumbled and sprawled across the furniture and all over the floor. Two games of Scrabble were in progress on the red carpet and the stereo speakers imbedded in the wall thumped and whined in acidic rhythms.

The dizzy redhead cartwheeled across the top of the couch, celebrating the blaring music. Ann finished with a headstand that exhibited a luscious silhouette, and then she let herself gently fall into my lap. We knew each other some.

"Hi," she shouted in my ear, laughing. "How are ya?"

"Oh-fine," I yelled back, making the response a one-word sound. I started getting us untangled and saw that one of the Scrabble games was breaking up. "Wanna play Scrabble?"

"Oh, boy." With childlike enthusiasm, she leaped to the floor and scrambled to one of the boards. Some of the other players were leaving; some were staying for another round.

I followed Ann to the floor, squinting through marijuana smoke at the board. She handed me a little wooden rack and we all started picking letters.

The game started quickly. The first turns we all had seemed dull to me, but Ann kept studying all the new developments with a half-genuine, half-self-parodying excitement.

"Fops," she read off the board.

I looked at my letters. "Oxymoron. That's a word." I placed it on the board by including an o already down along one side, thereby catching two triple-word-score squares. It was worth around fifty points, plus a fifty-point bonus for using all my letters.

"You're pretty smart for a half-nerd." Ann yelled in my ear and grabbed me by the throat with one hand. Then she stood up and I followed, to minimize the likelihood of a crushed windpipe. She patted me on the head with her other hand and took me upstairs to her room for a nasty retribution.

I learned in time that Ann's bright reddish mane of frizz darkened slightly and went tame when it got wet. A year later it was plastered

against her head from the spray in my apartment shower. Her hair ran in waves down the sides of her head as she stood with her soapy face tilted up at me, blinking against the water coming at her eyes from over my shoulder.

"I'm finished," she said loudly, over the sound of the water. Her voice reverberated among the tiles. "Lemme get in the water."

I moved around and let her stand under the spray. Her freckles were sun-darkened, but she was literally white in the places never open to the sun. I had a pronounced swimsuit line myself, but the effect was less noticeable. She was incredibly sensuous, but also looked kind of funny. I started soaping myself to quit thinking about it.

"You got soap in your eyes, dummy." She grabbed the shower nozzle and hosed off my face with it. Then she moved it down to get the rest of me.

"Yow! Watch it."

"Oop—sorry. Is that better?"

"Yeah."

"Hey, you've still got soap caught next to your eyes." She reached up to brush her finger at the outside corner of one eye. "It's caught in this little foldy-slanty place."

"Yeah, that happens."

"I got it."

She cleared the other one, too, and finished rinsing us both.

"You're not bad for a half-nerd," she yelled in my ear. Then she turned off the water and grabbed me, not by the throat, with one hand. Then she got out and I followed, dripping and quivering, hitching forward to minimize the likelihood of ripped flesh. She tossed a towel over my head with her other hand and took me into the other room for a careful re-examination.

Ann and I stayed together for most of several years. I was never in the military and we didn't discuss getting married, but: when white women like, *et cetera*, die.

I stood beneath the tower of a tiny airport, one neither cleared for jets nor sprayed for roaches. The searchlight circled the sky in silent unending swings, a beacon for flight 1203. Inside the low terminal building, a handful of small-town folks sat waiting in overalls, raincoats, plastic windbreakers, and dirty work clothes. I stared into the sky for Ann for an hour and a half, into a darkness more deadly than the vainest—

My thoughts were interrupted by an airline guy who came around to tell us all. Somewhere off in the distance, a storm had arisen quickly.

Blue Eyes and her red hair and her grabbing hand would not be coming in for a landing, anywhere.

Death Angel, can you see me?

This time was no better, but it was different. I was older and meaner and I had gone through this before. Instead of getting sick, I got angry. I had really wanted Ann, most of the time.

*I want my baby back.*

I stayed angry long enough to kick out the windows of my apartment, chase all the cats out of the alley, and lose all of my sensitive, fainthearted friends. The only ones left were the dense, unfeeling brutes. We had a good time there for a while.

Ann. Just another pretty redhead with brains and integrity.

Even after a few years had passed, and I was as much back to normal as I was going to get, I had lost my interest in romance.

I looked into the muddy water.

I looked into the muddy water.

I looked—

Actually, I'm still not sure whose face I saw. I didn't think I looked that lonely.

Alice did.

Alice just kind of showed up. I was prowling the winter night spots that week, with little money and less interest. I did it for something to do. Alice was a seven-year-old in an adult's body, an expatriate New Yorker by her accent, with burly brown hair. Two-thirds of her weight was below her waist. She tried to balance it by swelling her head.

"I have an I.Q. of 147," she told me at a bar.

I was sitting on a stool leaning over a Seven-Up and staring into the mirror behind the rows of bottles against the far wall. "Huh?" I said.

"You look smart. Are you an engineer? But I'm smarter." She smiled condescendingly and turned on her stool to survey the crowd behind us. "I like the bridge of your nose—it's so little."

I went back to staring at myself in the mirror. The glass was cheap and flawed; if I raised myself up and down slightly on the stool, the image stretched and flowed and compressed like the reflections in fun-house mirrors. I was having a good time.

"I'm only interested in monogamous, long-term relationships," she said. "I'm trying to meet a good man. I'm Alice."

"Huh?" I said, for the sake of consistency.

"I've played enough games. Basically, I'm ready to settle down now, so I try to get out and meet people."

"You come to bars to meet serious people?" I sneaked a glance at her. She smiled viciously. "I met you, didn't I?"

"Hardly," I said. I started admiring myself in the mirror some more.

After a while I heard voices next to me and sneaked another look. Some guy from the back had come up to speak to her. The longer I listened, the weirder she sounded. I had heard that pleading tone and seen the searching look on other occasions, but only when small children were lost and seeking their parents. I was glad her attention had been drawn off.

I paid for the Seven-Up and left the place. As I passed the bar, Alice was saying to the other guy, "He's just a friend. I've played enough games. Basically, I'm. . . ."

Outside, I trudged through the snow, staring at the packed footprints. I wandered aimlessly down the small-town street and eventually plunged my hands into my pockets. Puzzled, I brought one of them out again holding a strange glove.

It was a gray woman's glove, for the left hand, with a note in it: "Meet me at the old oak tree in two hours. This guy's just a friend. Love, Alice."

I threw away the note, and kept the glove. The next establishment I came to was a games parlor, where I sank all of my quarters into video machines. I sideswiped spaceships, gunned down hockey players, strafed racing cars, and torpedoed small children. As usual, I beat all but one of them; the World War I biplanes sank my sled. When my change was gone, I stood and watched other people destroy the silent, fluid images—never mind the background noises. The magical screen is silent.

After an hour and fifty minutes, I asked somebody where the old oak tree was. Without taking his eyes off the screen or his hands off the controls, the guy inclined his head quickly in a discernible direction. I thanked him and started walking. Snow was falling lightly outside.

This side of town was fairly old. It was the only area that had not been recently built up and furnished with saplings. However, a large public park out this way was the only place for a landmark called the old oak tree. I remembered that a large, fast river flowed through the center of it. Then, in the distance, down in a sort of hollow, I could see one huge old black tree with dead brown leaves standing out against the snow, with its back to the running river.

As long as I was walking along the edge of town, I remained among the light and sounds of all the places open to customers, among all the people out for a Saturday night fling. Once I started down the slope

toward the river bank, I found myself alone in a desolate white expanse broken only by the bare black branches of trees and the one great oak straight ahead. It was surrounded by footprints in the snow.

The river ran deep and murky here. A small whitecap churned over one wide root of the big oak that extended into the muddy water. The white snow reflected so much light from the town that I could see all the way across the river to the other bank. It only held more snow, though, and more young naked trees.

The old oak tree seemed to be a common meeting place, judging by the footprints. Then I noticed a small glove lying at the base of the tree. I picked it up. It was the mate of the one I had with me. A piece of paper crackled inside and I pulled it part way out.

The note was written in ink that had been smeared, apparently by someone who had arrived earlier and contributed to the footsteps around me. The first part of it was illegible, but the end was clear: "I just couldn't tell you that guy was just a friend. He wasn't. Goodbye forever. Love, Alice."

I dropped the glove on the snow in disgust. It was a stupid joke and I didn't like being suckered. Then I wondered. I glanced once more at the little glove with the paper sticking out of it. Then I stepped carefully around the big wide trunk of the old oak, with the river wind whipping tears into my eyes.

Two shapes looked back from the swirling murky depths. One was a frowning lonely face with tears in his eyes and lank hair tossed in the wind. Underneath it lay a calm sleeping face with closed eyelids, bobbing stiffly from under the root of the old oak.

When white women like slanted. . . .

I glanced up quickly, as though trying to catch a grinning Death Angel by surprise. Are you somewhere up there?

I swallowed and stepped back. Alice had been sick long before I had met her, but she hadn't drowned herself until now. I wondered if I had been some sort of last straw, but of course I would never really know. Anyhow, logic meant nothing to someone like her.

*I want my. . . . No, I don't.*

I looked around. No one was watching. I hurried back up the slope, out of the park.

Where oh where can my—never mind. I knew where; they were all dead and planted. Sometimes, though, I still wondered where I might find romance.

I found romance ten years after Cyn got herself smeared across the

railroad tracks. I ran into Gail early one summer when we were both back in town visiting our parents—I had known her in high school, and had been interested, but she had been seeing someone else. She was very pretty, with deep-set hazel eyes and short light brown hair. Her build was stocky yet very appealing. She mentioned that she was married but getting divorced. I asked her out to dinner.

The evening grew weird from the moment I got into my daddy's car—his current one, that is. Since I had flown into town, I had had to borrow it for the night. As I drove quietly through the old familiar residential streets, breathing the humid air and smelling the lush lawns that I knew so well, I realized that I was back in a situation like dating in high school. I grinned to myself. It had been a long time.

I pulled up in front of Gail's parents' house. The sun, behind a layer of clouds, was just starting down below the treetops. A summer storm was gathering over the prairie country here. I got out and walked across the bluegrass on the lawn.

I stood on the porch smelling the rain to come, and knocked on the screen door. It rattled. Gail's mother came to the door, also stocky and rather appealing. She was carrying a copy of *The Big Knockover* by Dashiell Hammett, with one finger in the book to mark her place.

Gail's mother smiled nicely. "Come in." She pushed the screen door open.

"Thanks." I followed her into a small living room, where she put the book down open-faced on an end-table.

"Sit down, John. Gail will be down in a few minutes. She's late, of course. How have you been?"

We sat down on opposite ends of a couch. "Okay," I said. We had met a few times ten or eleven years ago. I looked around. Gail was making noises upstairs, but no one else seemed to be home.

"I'm not funny any more," I said.

"You what?"

"I used to be snide and clever. Sarcastic and sardonic. Dry wit and disgusting metaphors. Snappy comebacks."

"I, um, don't think I knew that."

"Well, I am no longer capable of this. My life has been a nearly-endless succession of tragedies. I'm jaded and bitter."

"Oh, I see." She smiled and stood up. "Excuse me, won't you?"

"Sure."

She walked out of sight to the foot of the stairs I had seen near the door and screamed fiercely in a hoarse stage whisper. "*Gail you goddamn inconsiderate bitch! Get down here!*" Then she came back, smiled pleas-

antly, and sat down again. "Well, really, John. What are you bitter about?"

"Dead women."

"What?"

"Dead white women. Every time I meet a new woman, she croaks on me."

"Oh. Well. . . ." She smiled again, but her voice was hesitant. "I certainly hope that, uh, won't happen to Gail. Of course, you've known her for years."

"Of course."

Still smiling, she looked her lap. Then she started using one of her thumbnails to clean the other one.

In the silence, I looked out the big picture window at the darkening sky. A random thought crossed my mind: Death Angel, sing me a song.

Gail hurried down the stairs, still fastening one earring. She looked gorgeous.

"Sorry I'm late." She giggled. "I've always been late; I can't help it. Shall we go?"

"Let's go," I said. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye," said Gail's mother. "Drive carefully, all right?"

"All right," I said.

We crossed the lawn toward the car. The wind was chilly and I could feel a very faint drizzle beginning. The cool of the evening was going to take all the moisture from the summer air.

We got into the car just in time. The rain wasn't too heavy, but it was rain and not drizzle. "It's going to be wet all night," said Gail. "Well, I don't mind. Are we still going to be on time for the reservation?"

"Yeah. I made it for plenty of time after I was going to pick you up." I started the car and turned on the wipers. "Remember, I've known you a long time."

She laughed. "Oh!" She punched the side of my arm.

"Whoa! That's my drivin' arm." I pulled on the headlights and got us underway.

"Oops, sorry."

I drove through the darkness, watching the rain slant through the white beams of the headlights. The inside of the car felt warm and oozy. I slowed down for a red light. "It's wonderful to see you again."

"Well, *thank* you. It feels sort of funny, you know, after being married for so long—or maybe I shouldn't talk about that."

I laughed as I accelerated from the intersection. "I don't mind. If something comes up in the conversation, go 'head and say it."



“Oh, okay. Anyhow, it’s been a long time since I went out with a man who wasn’t my husband.”

I could tell she was smiling, so I glanced over and smiled back. “It’s been a long time for me since I was out with anyone.”

I rounded a sharp curve and then slammed on the brakes. There in the road, straight ahead, a car was stalled. My car began to skid on the wet pavement. I couldn’t stop, so I yanked the wheel to the right.

White women and slanted eyes.

At the last second, I saw the big white side of a building in my headlights. Then the tires cried, the metal shrieked, and glass shattered. Gail screamed—

I woke up watching a downpour against the windshield. With something warm and sticky in my eyes, I was lying on a front seat that was sharply tilted to the left. I could feel the weight of Gail against me. People were standing all around, at some distance, and I could see police cars in the rearview mirror, parked to block traffic. I could not have been out long. A tow truck pulled up as I wiped blood out of my eyes. Police officers came running toward us.

I could see people shouting and tugging at the doors, but I could not hear them. Gail’s eyelids were moving slightly, so I maneuvered around to where I could raise her head. Beyond the windshield, an ambulance came floating into view, the image rippling through the rain on the windshield. Paramedics jumped out and ran toward us, leaving the big red light on the van swinging, throwing its beams at us in a deadly, silent rhythm.

Gail was trying to speak, but I couldn’t understand her. I held her close instead, watching the swinging light from the ambulance cross us. Her injuries were not visible. The only blood on her face was mine, but the face was not hers.

In the shadows, her features were hard to see, but every time the red light of the ambulance swung our way, she changed, in a constant steady rhythm, still beating; *Cyn’s* brown hair, *Ann’s* red curls, *Alice’s* frizz, *Gail’s* deepest *hazel eyes*, *Cyn* and *Ann* and *Alice* and *Gail*, faces changing every time. *Cyn* now *Ann* now *Alice* now *Gail*. *One* and *two* and beating, beating.

Gail died in my arms. I could feel it. As crowbars began prying open her door, I tilted my head up toward the sky, trying to see through the rain on the windshield. My real lover had been with me all along.

Crowbars tore open the door. Cold rain and wind slashed inside, with sirens wailing their tragic song.

Death Angel: Am I still your own true love?  
And the harsh voice whispered sweetly in the tearing, chilling gale:  
See you in September.

*I want—*

I woke up in a hard bed, staring upward at a white ceiling. It had thousands of tiny cracks, like the magic in my soul. Something was wrapped around my head. The place smelled of isopropyl alcohol.

At first I didn't remember what had happened. When I did, I sat up suddenly and started to get out of bed. Inside my skull, bowling balls smashed into pins. Tiny scorekeepers started marking Xs.

As I dangled my legs over a metal railing, trying to clear my brain, something stabbed the inside of one elbow. An IV was hooked into me. Carefully, to avoid the certainty of ripped flesh, I pulled off the tape and withdrew the needle. Then I slid off the bed. "For observation" was written on my chart, along with "concussion."

I was in a big ward, but stained white curtains separated me from the adjacent beds. I spent several minutes steadying myself. My knees were quivering, and my head seemed to waver around like a rotting apple about to drop. The flow was cold; I wore only a hospital gown. In front of me, a mirror reflected my image clearly, without waves or ripples. My head was bandaged, scarred, and pale, with lank hair lying flat.

Getting out was easy, after I retched twice in the room. My stomach had nothing to throw up, though. I found my clothes in a drawer and put the hospital gown back on over them. A little comb was in the packet of toilet articles supplied by the hospital. I walked out of the building like I owned the place, with my t-shirt casually draped over the spot where my i.d. tag should have been. Since no one looked closely, they all thought I was an Asian hospital worker of some kind, I supposed, wearing an ugly lab coat.

Or maybe no one noticed me.

A small gust of wind would have blown me over, but I clung to parking meters and old people as I moved down the sidewalk. On the outside, I learned that three days had passed—it was the first of September, late in the afternoon. Gail had just been plowed under.

I hitchhiked to my folks' place, made excuses, and went out again. In the garage, I heaved a shovel into the trunk of my mommy's car and took off. At the nearest fast food vendor, I ate a garbage burger and drank something resembling stagnant pond water. Then I threw up for real, ate another burger, and kept it.

At sundown, I pulled up to the top of the hill and stopped at the little

cemetery hidden among the suburban homes that had been built around it. It was far older than even the suburban city itself: some of the worn tombstones held vague indentations representing dates from the Civil War. I could hear television sets from inside some of the houses. A phone rang.

I took the shovel from the trunk. It was an old one, with a long handle worn smooth and gray over years of use. The heavy heart-shaped blade was all reddish-brown with rust. I climbed over the chainlink fence into the graveyard in the graying roseate light, hoisting the shovel overhead like a quarterstaff. The chirping of crickets was deafening.

I found the new grave easily, even in the gathered darkness. Yellowish light leaked from houses and streetlights, showing me fresh sod cut into distinct rectangles. The grass was wet from being watered all day. I wondered if Gail's mother had cried over it. Humidity made the air thick and heavy.

I wondered if slugs favored graveyards.

The sod peeled back easily. The dirt underneath had been tamped down, but was not packed very hard. I bit the shovel into it and stepped hard with one foot. It only went down a little; I was weak and underweight from living off the IV. So I moved the dirt slowly, in small loads on the tip of the shovel.

Hours later, I sat collapsed at the bottom of a relatively deep hole in the ground, soaked with sweat and half-eaten by mosquitoes. It was not deep enough.

The late summer stars above me were clear and bright. Dirt clung to the sweat on my face, arms, and back. My head was pounding with the rhythm of a searchlight. Little unseen creatures were starting to crawl on me.

I forced myself up, leaned for a moment on the shovel, then kept on digging. When I hit the coffin, renewed spirit gave me energy. The big box echoed hollowly as I scraped dirt away from it. By this time, just getting the loose dirt out of the hole was a chore, and I had to rest another four times before the coffin lid was clear. Then, with several tries, I smashed the fastenings with the shovel. I braced myself against the dirt walls in one corner of the hole, and pried it open.

Blackness gaped beneath the lid. The smooth padded satin of the coffin's interior only glistened on the sides; the bottom of the coffin, and its contents, were gone. I stood bent over the opening, motionless, staring into a deep hole.

Harsh, whispered laughter blew cold into my ear. I spun and then stiffened in horror. Above me floated the bare grinning skull, the death's

head ringed with just enough scalp to hang wispy golden hair, of the Death Angel. She hovered in my face on ratty white wings, with a smudged and tattered white gown flapping empty beneath her chattering jaw. Her breath sounded like a phonograph needle sliding across an old 45.

Stepping back in revulsion, I gripped the handle of the shovel and swung it hard, giving it all the strength I had left, pulling on the swing like a home-run slugger. The huge old blade of the shovel shattered the skull like it was cheap plastic and a faint whimpered cry escaped on the night wind. Yet on the slopes of soil around me, tiny bits of bone began to wriggle and grow anew.

I dropped the shovel into the hole and heard it land somewhere below the coffin. A high, melodic, peaceful singing came from within the earth. I jumped.

I hit cold, packed earth not far down. The shock of landing hurt both my legs, and I fell. Pale light streamed down from above me. A huge darkened tunnel stretched before me.

The serene singing was clearer now and I thought I recognized the voices. As they approached, they stopped singing in unison and began to take turns.

“I wanted my baby. . . .”

“I miss him. . . .”

“I can’t live. . . .”

Four vague shapes were walking toward me in the dim yellow light. A cool breeze floated from them, smelling foul to the point of sweetness.

As they came closer, the silhouettes came clear in the diffused glow from above me. Their shapes were familiar. Darkness hid their faces, but I saw them open their arms.

The singing had no words, now, but only a peaceful melody. I rose to meet them. Overhead, the strange light was gradually going out.

Yes, they could hear me; yes, they could see me. As though when slanted eyes like white women, slanted eyes die—only they don’t, really. Death Angels came singing me a song, and I was home.



## Crystal

Charles L. Grant

*According to the introduction to "Crystal" in The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, where Charles L. Grant's first story appeared in 1968, "Crystal" is Grant's 100th short story sale. Not bad for a former New Jersey high school English teacher—and, considering the high quality of those 100 stories, a record any writer must envy. Not good enough for Grant, who is also a novelist and anthologist of note. To date he has written or edited over forty books, in addition to another twenty or so under various pseudonyms. Recent novels include The Pet and For Fear of the Dark; recent anthologies include After Midnight, Greystone Bay #3, and Shadows 10.*

*Born in Newark, New Jersey on September 12, 1942, Charles L. Grant shares with Ramsey Campbell a fascination with contemporary urban horrors (What is it about being born in depressing industrial cities?), although Grant's chosen milieu leans toward the middle-class, suburban bedroom-community of the American Northeast. But forget about that, since "Crystal" is set in the Bloomsbury area of London, as anyone who has ever strolled past Russell Square toward the British Museum will quickly recognize. Grant, like some other American authors, enjoys stopping in this part of London. So far he's always made it back to New Jersey.*

THE SHOP WASN'T a very smart one as shops in the district went, but Brian had weeks ago learned that it catered mostly to tourists and the occasional country family in town for a holiday, and so needed only a bit of flash, a few items with the royal family on them, and a dozen different street maps from which to choose the best way of getting lost.

Now, Brian, he thought then in a silent scold, that's not the way to think, is it? This is London, boy, and you're practically a native. You're not going to get lost, you're not going to be shortchanged, you're not going to be taken for a foreigner at all. Until, that is, you open your fat Yank mouth.

His reflection in the shop window smiled wryly at him, and he nodded to it just as a young man and his girl wandered by, saw him, and gave him a puzzled look, the boy lifting an eyebrow and the girl shoving a laugh into her palm. Startled, he watched them until, if he wanted to watch them further, he'd have to look directly at their backs; so he stuffed his hands into his pockets and returned to his contemplation of the display.

Seeing nothing.

Hearing nothing of the homewardbound traffic grumbling past him on High Holborn.

Until a face in the window caught his attention. A young woman, striking in a dark-haired, pallid sort of way, and he smiled again, hopes rising, until he realized with a derisive snort it was a picture he was looking at. And not a very good one, at that. Oval, in fading color, framed in cheap silver.

He leaned closer.

No. Not cheap at all. In fact, the frame only appeared to be simple, but there around the edges were etchings of long-stemmed roses, so delicately done the sunlight blotted them out until he moved his shadow over their stems. He cocked his head and leaned closer still; he felt his left hand bunching around the roll of money he kept in his trousers; and when a horn blared behind him, he jumped and moved instantly and casually into the store.

The shopkeeper was a rotund man and thickly mustached. He remained behind the rear counter when Brian asked about the picture, saying that if he were interested, he was more than welcome to take it out of the window and bring it into the light. Brian shrugged. He didn't want to appear too stupid, nor too interested. Nevertheless, he made his way slowly back along the narrow aisle, angling sideways between a group of women chattering in Texas-Southern accents about how *darling* everything was and wouldn't Cousin Annie just *love* a picture of that *adorable* Prince Andrew. Carefully, he reached around a newspaper display and picked up the frame.

It was heavy, much heavier than it had a right to be.

He turned it around and looked at the portrait.

Narrow face; narrow chin; wide, dark eyes that matched the dark hair curling under her jaw. The hint of a lace-trimmed velvet bodice. Bare shoulders. Nothing more.

Attractive, he decided, but with an odd distance in her gaze.

He hefted it. Tilted it to the light when he felt the shopkeeper watching. Frowned as if in concentration and debate, shrugged as if in

reluctant decision, and carried it back, waiting patiently as the women fussed with the unfamiliar coinage, finally giving up and handing the man some bills, their faces sharp in daring him not to give them their due.

Brian grinned, and the man grinned back over a blue-tinted head. One of the ladies turned around and glared, obviously taking him for a local and extending the dare to him.

But he only nodded politely and handed over the picture as soon as the women moved on, chattering again, exclaiming, and wondering aloud why the English, with all their experience, didn't have money like the Americans, it would make things so much easier all around, don't you think?

"You must get tired of it, Mr. Isling," Brian said sympathetically as he pulled out his roll and coins and gave him the correct amount.

"Not so much anymore, Mr. Victor," was the smiling answer. "At least I don't have to put my feet up in a hotel, do I, when the day is over."

"Oh, they're not that bad." But his expression put the lie to it, and the man laughed, put the purchase in a paper bag, and thanked him for the sale.

Halfway up the aisle, Brian turned. "Do you know who she is?" he asked.

"Who?"

He held up the bag.

"No. Not really, that is. There's a name on the back. Crystal. I reckon that's either her or the artist."

"Do you get many of them?"

Isling hesitated, then shook his head. "Only one of that lot, far as I know. We get them now and then, the odd piece. Sometimes they last until I junk them; sometimes they go as soon as I put them out."

"And this one?"

"Put it out this morning."

"It must have known I was coming."

The shopkeeper's laughter followed him to the street, where he turned left, elbows in to protect his ribs from his dubious prize, trying to decide if he should go back to his room now, or find someplace to eat and examine his folly there. Wherever it was, it would have to be someplace quiet, someplace that would allow him peace, to figure out why the hell he'd spent so much on a whim.

He slid the frame just far enough out of the bag to take a puzzled look, heard someone scream a warning, and looked up in time to see a black, square-framed taxi jump the curb and head straight for him. He shouted



and leapt to one side, lost his balance and fell over the curbing into the street. The taxi plowed on, scattering pedestrians and postcard displays until it slammed through the window of the shop he'd just left. There was a man's yell, a faint whump, a whiff of gas, and suddenly the pavement was alive with smoke and fire.

Brian immediately crossed his arms protectively over his head, half expecting that any moment some fiery shard of metal would soon crash down on him, that glass lances would shred him. And he stayed on his side until he heard someone asking him if he was all right. Cautiously, he lowered his arms. Sirens were already blaring, and through the thick smoke he could see figures rushing about the shop with fire extinguishers hissing.

"Do you need help?"

He didn't object when hands cupped under his arms and pulled gently, until he gathered his feet beneath him and stood. He swayed a bit, and coughed. Someone brushed grime from his denim jacket, a piece of something from his hair, then led him away from the scene, talking all the while about the danger of living in the city these days, and if it wasn't the damned IRA or the damned Arabs, it was the damned taxis going wrong and he'd be damned if he didn't think the damned Apocalypse was coming.

Brian's eyes stopped their watering, but his right leg still hurt where he'd cracked it on the street, and his right shoulder felt as if it had been yanked from its socket. He groaned and gripped his arm, tensing with the anticipation of feeling the flow of blood.

"You need a doctor?"

After a moment he shook his head, closed his eyes tightly, and willed the pain to go away, come back later when he wasn't shaking so much. When he opened them again, his benefactor was gone and the police were already cordoning off the area. He walked off, still a bit wobbly but able to convince those who saw him that he wasn't drunk or crazy.

And it wasn't until he'd cut through Russell Square several minutes later and was heading toward his place near the university that he realized the bag was still clamped under his sore arm. A sign, he decided, and leaned against the nearest lamppost, took the picture out, and smiled at the woman.

"Crystal," he said, "why do I get the feeling you've just saved my life?"

"Don't flatter yourself, boy. It was a mistake."

Brian nearly dropped the package at the voice, then whirled and scowled. "Melody," he said, "you could have taken ten years off me, sneaking up like that."

Melody Tyce only laughed, parts and sections of her rippling in accompaniment as she tried to get a closer look at what he was holding in his hand. "You talking to pictures now, Brian?"

Quickly, he tucked Crystal back into her bag and tucked it back under his arm. "None of your business."

She laughed again and pushed coquettishly at the mass of blonde hair that ill-framed her pudgy face. She was much too large for so much atop her head, and, he thought, for the snug clothes she wore. It made her seem as if she were trying too hard, which he knew wasn't the case where he was concerned. She was a good-natured woman who had taken him under her wing, sending him to the restaurants where meals were good and just as good with their prices, to the shops where his clothes wouldn't look as if they'd fallen off the rack, and to the clubs where he might, were he more aggressive, even meet a young lady.

"Oh, come on," she persisted. "What do you have? Not one of *those* things, is it?"

"No," he said with a grin. "Something I picked up in a shop, that's all."

"Ah. A souvenir."

"Yes. Sort of."

She nodded. "Better. You're forgiven, then, for talking to yourself."

"I wasn't talking—" He made to ease her away, to give him some room, and the package slipped to the pavement. Instantly she pounced on it, and since the picture had slipped out of its covering, she was able to take a good look as she handed it back.

"Well, I'll be damned," she said.

"What?" He moved to her side and peered at the woman's face over her shoulder. "You know her?"

"I should." Her thumb ran along the frame, tracing the roses, while she sighed. "Where'd you get it, Brian?"

He told her.

She sighed again.

"Hey, what?" he said as she pushed it back into his hands and walked off. "C'mon, Mel, what gives?"

Midway down the block she stopped, shaking her head and looking up at the clean white facade of what had once been a Georgian town-house, was now only one of several bed-and-breakfast hotels that lined the narrow street.

"Mel, what do you mean, you should know her?" Then he followed her gaze into the top-floor window, over the narrow entrance. "No," he said. "No, you're kidding."

"Clear as day, it's her."

They took the steps together, and he held the door, frowning but not wanting to push her with more questions. What she was claiming was clearly absurd—that the picture was of her mother, who lived in a large room two floors above the entrance and seldom showed herself to any of the guests. It couldn't be. She was, by his estimation after the one time he had seen her, well over eighty and almost as large as Melody herself.

At the back of the square foyer now used as a lobby was a large desk. Melody hurried behind it and dropped into a wing-back chair, slapped her hands on the blotter, stared at him without expression. "I gave that to Ben two weeks ago," she said. "Told him to take it to a friend that has a shop in Salisbury. He promised me he would."

"But why, if it's true?"

"Oh, it's true, Brian. And the why of it? Because she don't like seeing herself like that anymore. It makes her—"

"Oh," he said. "Oh, I see." And he supposed that seeing his own photograph, taken now, thirty years in the future would probably drop him into an unstoppable depression. "Oh, hell."

"It's all right," she assured him. "I should have known it wouldn't be that easy. Bad pennies, if you know what I mean."

He said nothing more, just gave her a sympathetic look and started up the winding staircase toward his own room on the middle floor. And once inside, he flopped into his armchair and puffed his cheeks, blew out a breath, and set the picture on the table beside him.

"So," he said as he unlaced his shoes and kicked them under the bed. "So that's what you looked like, you old bat. Not bad. Mind telling me what happened?"

He laughed shortly, hoisted himself back up, and stripped to his underwear. There was a basin in one corner, and a mirror over it in which he saw the spreadings of a pair of marvelous bruises—one on his shoulder, another reaching up over his hip. Suddenly he began to tremble, and a chill of perspiration slipped over his chest and back. He coughed, he choked, and he barely made it to the toilet at the end of the hall before he lost his breakfast, and the bit of lunch he'd taken during his walk.

Ten minutes later he lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

Delayed reaction, he thought, and almost immediately fell asleep.

Dreamless.

Long.

Waking shortly after sunset when a screech of brakes made him sit up, his breath short and his hands clenched into white-knuckled fists.

"Jesus," he said, reached up and switched on the tiny light affixed to

the wall. The floor-to-ceiling windows were open, the curtains drifting with the breeze; the armchair a dark blotch in front of a fireplace bricked over, its shadow on the wall slightly wavering, as if under water.

He rubbed his eyes until they burned, then forced his fingers to relax, groaning when the aches, dull and throbbing, erupted along the side. He wondered if he ought not to see a doctor, and by the time he had decided it wasn't worth it, he was sleeping again.

Dreaming, this time, of phantom taxis and phantom drivers and old Ben Isling crushed to death behind his counter.

He spent most of the following day in the hotel, watching television, eating sandwiches, fussed over by Melody, who told him more than once that if he wanted to get rid of the picture, she could take it out to her friend in Salisbury herself. The other guests wandered in and out of the cozy front room, clucking, shaking their heads, giving him all the sympathy he required, until Melody finally laughed and told him he ought to charge admission.

But Bess didn't come. Bess Orbache, a young American like himself, using the city as a way to bury her past. Or so he thought each time she refused him a history, or even a hint. He hoped she was all right; he knew, however, she was more than all right, she was competent and confident and didn't need him for a squire.

On the third day, he walked to get the stiffness from his leg, had dinner and too much to drink at a pub he haunted, and finally, when there was no place to go, went to his bed.

And dreamed of taxis and explosions and something crawling black and wet through his window.

He woke with a start, blinking sleep away without sitting up. A few deep breaths to calm him, and he turned his head to the left, and saw the door to his room several inches ajar.

God, he thought, and felt himself grow cold, not once moving his gaze from the bit of hallway he could see. There was no one out there, not anymore, but he held his breath anyway, against the odd chance.

This is silly, you know, he told himself when he felt his shoulders trembling; you're just the victim of a beautiful woman who wanted to see your body before asking you to her suite at the Savoy for a night of—  
Someone screamed.

"Jesus," he said, and leapt to his feet, wincing at the ache in his bruised leg as he stumbled back into his clothes. By the time he was dressed, the hallway was filling with those guests still at home, most of them crowding to the center stairwell. As best he could tell from the babble and the whispers, someone on the floor below had been discovered in

his room; murder, it was said, a throat cut and enough blood to paint most of one wall.

A young woman, shorter than he, her long brown hair touched prematurely with strands of gray, swayed a bit as the descriptions grew more graphic, and he put a hand on her back to prevent her from falling.

"I'm all right!" she snapped, then looked over her shoulder. "Oh, sorry, Brian. I thought it was Mr. White."

He smiled, tapped her once with a finger, and they backed away to a free corner. "Mr. White? Thanks a lot, Bess. It's just what I needed."

Her answering smile was more forced than easy, the faint spray of her freckles nearly vanishing in the attempt, and he leaned back against the wall, a hand in a hip pocket. Thurmond White was a lone traveler—fresh from Virginia, though he had no identifiable accent—with one eye out for bargains and the other out for lonely women. Bess, it seemed, was one of his prime candidates for either category, and twice Brian had to rescue her in the lobby by pretending they had a date. White hadn't been gracious, and hadn't given up the fight.

Bess, for her part, allowed him to take her to dinner both times, once more to the theater, once again to a film. Their good-nights were so chaste he wanted to scream.

They said nothing as they watched the dozen or so guests shift around for better views; they tensed when they heard the sirens stop outside, heard footsteps on the carpeted stairs, heard voices raised in authority.

"I don't think I want to talk to the cops," he said at last, and with a nod for her to join him, slipped back into his room.

She took the chair at once; he sat cross-legged on the bed.

"I heard you nearly caught it the other day," she said, staring around the room as if it were light-years different from her own down the hall. "Are you all right?"

He explained what had happened, didn't bother to exaggerate the injuries he'd received. She wasn't that impressed, though she didn't seem to mind that he couldn't stop looking at the T-shirt she wore—a thin one, and of a solid black that accentuated the tan of her bare arms and the curve of her chest. With a few variations, it was what she had worn since the first day he had met her; he assumed she had several of them and knew what they did.

Then he told her about waking up and finding the door open.

"Oh, my God," she said, sitting suddenly forward. "Brian, do you realize you could have been a victim? My God!" She scanned the room again, this time checking the shadows for a lurking killer. "My God!" And she was grinning.

A flare of light when the wind parted the curtains, and she looked to the side table and saw the picture of Crystal.

"Melody's mother," he said to her unasked question.

"You're kidding. That old bat?"

"So she says."

Bess reached for the frame, changed her mind with a frown, and suggested that he make sure he kept his door locked. When he told her he did, she reminded him it had been open.

"Or opened," she amended with a sly, menacing smile.

"Right," he said. "Now look, I don't know about you, but living dangerously makes me hungry."

"I already ate."

"Eat again."

She looked at him, considered, and nodded, then took his arm, stroked it once, and led him into the hall, where they were stopped by a constable who asked them if they'd mind looking in at the downstairs lounge, just a few questions, no problems, the inspector would take only a moment of their time.

Melody Tyce met them on the landing and looked at him strangely.

The inspector took exactly ten minutes, thanked them, and took their names.

"I'll be damned," Bess said as they walked out to the street.

"I'm not surprised," he said. "Sooner or later one of his women was bound to catch on."

"You knew him well?" she asked dubiously.

"No. But White was the kind of guy . . . I don't know. The kind of guy who just travels around, seeing what he can get from where he is before going somewhere else. I don't know. Old before his time, you know what I mean?"

"Sure," she said, skipping a step. "Decadent."

He thought about it, and shook his head. "No. Just lost, I think."

"Ah," she said. "Very profound."

Maybe, he thought, and wondered if she knew how much the description seemed to fit him. If she did, she said nothing, and once their meal was over, they walked home in silence, not holding hands, not brushing arms, and when she skipped up the steps to her room he stood in the foyer shaking his head.

Was it something I said? he thought with a grin.

And thought about it again the next morning when Melody acted as if he had just contracted the plague. Her manner was stiff, her eyes blank when she looked at him, and as he headed out for a day trip to the Tower,

he looked back and saw her standing in the doorway, arms folded under her breasts.

From Traitor's Gate, then, to the armor museum, he walked through the tour and thought of nothing but Bess. She was getting to him. She was taunting him. The idea she was toying with him got him so mad that he returned to the hotel before he was ready and sat on the steps, waiting for her, ready to demand an explanation of her disinterest.

The sun set.

He went up to his room only once, to change clothes, and turned Crystal's face away when her eyes seemed to follow.

Back outside he sat again, hands on knees, seeing a patrol car pass and remembering Mr. White and Ben. I am, he thought then, pretty damn lucky after all.

A light switched on in a room overhead, and he looked up and back, and saw a shadow behind curtains. Melody's mother, and he rolled his shoulders in a shudder.

Bess showed up just after nine, smiled broadly when she realized he'd been waiting just for her, and nodded when all the dialogues he'd imagined came out as an invitation to a late dinner up the street.

They ate at the nearest Garfunkel's, neither of them wanting to walk very far, neither in the mood for anything fancy. She took a place on the wall-length booth, he the aisle chair. The only adventurous thing they attempted was switching plates when he was unable to face the bland meat he'd been served. And neither of them spoke of more than the cool weather, the bright skies, the tourists who seemed to be crowding into everything and not giving the true Anglophiles a chance to indulge, until Bess looked peculiarly at the veal she'd been nibbling.

"Something wrong?"

"The cheese," she said, her face abruptly pale, the freckles suddenly too dark.

He reached over with a fork and took a bit on a tine, tasted it with his tongue, and shrugged. "Seems all right to me."

She gagged and covered her mouth with her napkin, looking apologetic and near frightened at the same time. When she reached for and failed to grab her glass of water, he half rose and began to search for a waitress, looked back in time to see her slump to one side in the false leather booth. With a cry for help, he kicked back his chair and attempted to stretch her out along the seat. She moaned. He muttered encouragement and chafed her wrists, reached around and grabbed a napkin to dip into water when he saw the perspiration breaking over her brow.

A doctor pushed him aside.

Two minutes later she was dead.

Five minutes later the place was closed down, and within the hour he was standing in front of the hotel, looking up at the lighted window where Melody's mother lived. Questioned and released from the scene, the urge to wander had been suppressed in favor of a sudden macabre curiosity. He supposed, if he were inclined to believe in such things, that the portrait was some sort of good-luck charm; and right now it was difficult not to believe. The taxi, White's murder, the rat poison-tainted food; add them up and they tallied deaths that should have been his. Add them another way, however, and they tallied a run of good fortune that had nothing to do with anyone's likeness. Melody had said it herself, in fact—that she had gotten rid of it because her mother didn't like it. She called it a bad penny, which, to Brian's mind, had nothing at all to do with good luck.

The questions shifted as a shadow approached them.

He stepped back toward the curb, not bothering to look away.

The curtains parted just enough for him to see a slant of face, a slash of vivid blue, before they closed again and the shadow backed away.

He almost went in. He almost ran up the steps and slammed open the door. But a sudden image of Bess' stricken face loomed over the stoop, and he turned away and began walking—past buildings that even in the dark seemed a century out of place, past short-skirted girls who giggled softly in the shadows, past theatergoers in fine clothes, and belligerent shills who told him he'd better not wait, mate, if he didn't want to miss the city's greatest show.

He saw none of the neon, none of the headlamps, none of the faces that turned toward him and away.

Good luck, he thought sourly; what the hell kind of good luck was it for Bess, and Mr. White, and old Ben at the shop?

Coincidence.

Poisoned meat.

He was angry at himself for not feeling more sorrow at young Bess's dying, but he had hardly known her except as someone he couldn't have; he felt nothing at all for Thurmond White, in spite of the man's brashness and his ill-mannered ways; and Ben just happened to be standing where he was, at his post in the shop as the taxi crashed through.

Coincidence.

Good luck.

Bad pennies; and he whirled, nearly knocking over an old woman, and broke into a run that soon covered him with sweat, had his shift clinging to his chest, filled his shoes with slimy damp. The dark streets were quiet



save for the slap of his soles; the last of the leaves hissed as he passed. Twice he had to dodge cars as he crossed in a street's center; once he had to outrun a dog he'd surprised rooting in garbage.

He ran back to the hotel and stood on the pavement, and when Melody came to the door he only glared and nodded.

She had a sweater cloaked over her wide shoulders, and she fussed with the top button as she came down the steps.

"It's her," he said tightly, pointing at the window.

"I admit, it's unusual."

He could barely see her face, but he could sense her hesitant smile. "Unusual? Christ, Mel, it's impossible!"

She took his hand and tugged. When he resisted, she tugged again. "Won't hurt, Brian. It won't hurt to look."

He shook off her grip, but followed her just the same, into the lobby, up the stairs, through the fire door and around to the front. She knocked and tilted her head, gave him a smile and walked in, and he rode with her on her shadow.

A single bed, a single chair, a dresser on the far wall.

A crystal chandelier that blinded him until he squinted.

Melody stood beside him.

The other woman stood with her back to the curtains.

She wore a red velvet nightdress trimmed in faint gold, a complement to the ebony that spilled over her shoulders. Her face told him she was sixty, perhaps even thirty; her hands told him she was thirty, perhaps even twenty; and she was as far from fat as he was from content.

She was the woman in his picture, framed by the silvered drapes.

"She tries very hard, my granddaughter does," said the woman named Crystal, in a soft, whipping voice. "Her mother was no better."

He heard Melody sobbing; he didn't look around.

"I suspect she took a fancy to you, a little before I did." The smile was brief and cold. "For different reasons, of course. She fancies she loves you."

He did look then, and looked away from the tears; then reached behind him for the doorknob. "You're crazy," he said.

"You're alive," she told him.

He snorted, courage returned when he wasn't looking in her eyes. "Look, lady—"

"You're here," she said quietly, "because you've no place else to go, isn't that so? No home. No family. You live in the past, and England is perfect for ambitions like that. And so do I, Brian. So do I." The rustle of velvet. "My past, not yours."

He yanked the door open and stepped into the hall; and once out of the wash of white light, he took a deep breath, and shuddered, and headed for the stairs. It was time, he thought, to move on. Another city, perhaps the Continent. Maybe even go back to the States. It didn't matter as long as he didn't stay here.

Melody hurried up behind him.

"Tote the tab," he said as he climbed toward his room. "I'll be down in a few minutes."

"You don't get it yet, do you?" she said.

"Get it?" He looked down. "C'mon, Mel, you know me."

She wiped her nose with a sleeve. "Do you know who had that picture before you?"

"You did. You told me."

"No. Not me. Mr. White."

He blinked, and grinned. "Mel, this isn't the time. I—"

"I killed him."

He fumbled for the banister and lowered himself to the step. "You didn't."

"She was tired of him. With a few exceptions, he was growing to like older women."

"So?"

"Older women, Brian, don't have much time left."

He stood angrily. "Jesus, Mel, what the hell are you pulling here, huh?" His eyes closed, and opened. "Oh, I get it. Your grandmother has the power to take what life is left from a person, right? She then gives that portrait to someone, and it brings them good luck—like not dying when they should." He spread his hands. "No problem, Mel. If it'll make you feel better, I'll leave it behind. O.K.? Are you happy?"

He started up again (*my past*) and reached the landing, then turned around (*not yours*) because he saw the cab, and the blood, and young Bess on a stretcher.

"Let me get this straight," he said to Melody, who was still waiting. "You arranged, somehow, for me to get the picture because Mr. White didn't pick the girls, he picked older women?"

"You were the type," she said. "She always knows the type."

"And . . ." He put a finger to his chin. "And no matter where I go, because of me people are going to die just to keep her where she is."

Melody lifted a helpless hand.

"You," he said, "are insane. So is that imposter in there, or was the old woman the fake?"

He pulled open the fire door—

“Brian, how did you feel when poor Bess was dead?”

—and stepped into the hall, snatched his key from his pocket, and slammed into his room.

He didn't turn on the lights.

He didn't look at Crystal's picture.

He stood at the window and stared down at the street through the gauze of the curtains.

What a stupid thing to say, he thought, spinning the key in one hand; I felt lousy, I felt rotten, I felt . . .

And he knew then what Crystal wanted.

Not the dead, not the dying, but the fact that good old Brian, like Thurmond White, would never really care.

A polite knock on the door.

“What!” he said as a tour coach drifted by.

“The bill,” Melody said. “Do you still want it?”

A pair of young women in jeans and down jackets huddled on the opposite pavement, knapsacks at their feet, and they were studying a map.

“Brian?”

“No,” he said loudly, and parted the curtain.

One of them looked up and saw him, poked her companion, and they smiled.

He heard Melody shift the picture so it faced his bed.

“Brian, she's waiting.”

Girls, he thought; they're not much older than girls.

He watched them without expression, watched their flirting and their intent, and when he nodded at the last, the light in the room above switched off, and he waited.

Listening to the girls hurry over to the door.

Listening as Melody left to let them in.

Waiting, and sighing, because he didn't feel a thing.

## Retirement

Ron Leming

*Ron Leming is another writer struggling out of the pack of small press writers. His stories have appeared in Potboiler, Sycophant, Twisted, The Horror Show, Eldritch Tales, and other leading small press magazines, and he has had recent sales to professional markets such as Mayfair and Outlaw Biker (from which the following story is reprinted). Leming is also a small press editor with the Damnations anthology series and the forthcoming Slice of the Razor. Just at this moment he is concentrating on his budding career as an artist.*

*Ron Leming says that he was supposedly born on September 11, 1950, but doesn't know where, as he is an orphan. As for his background: "Just out of high school I went into the music business and played in several well-known bands during the sixties. I've been an actor in very cheap, very bad B movies, a chef, a biker, a gas station manager, a professional full contact martial arts fighter and instructor, owned my own restaurant, built custom vans, dug ditches, flown planes, worked for a year as a mortician's assistant . . . I love cats, sex, drugs and rock and roll. Presently I'm playing in a rock and roll band called CHAINSAW RE-DEEMER. Part punk, part metal, and all hardcore rock and roll." Isn't it amazing just how many horror writers like cats?*

"I WANT TO BE laid out nice and neat on my stomach," Jack said, "with my pants down around my ankles so everybody can kiss my ass goodbye."

"Jack," Chell said reproachfully.

"Well," Jack said, "it's true." He took another drink of Rebel Yell and looked lustfully at Chelly, behind the bar. "What about you?" he asked. "How do you want to be buried?"

Chell was my best waitress—my only waitress. It was an exceptionally slow night at Diamond Dog's—a very slow bar, at best—and how we'd gotten round to talking about death and burial, I'll never know. It had just seemed to come up in the conversation. I wouldn't be the one to object, though. DD's was all I had—since my wife had died—so my

customers and neighbors and regulars were my friends, and I depended on their good will to fill my time and stimulate my mind. Not a good life, maybe—but life enough.

“I don’t rightly know,” Chell said. “I never thought about it much. I guess I’ll just do whatever everybody else is doing when the times comes—’cept maybe with a little less money.” She laughed and slapped Jack lightly on the shoulder. “Us poor folks cain’t afford to die, you know, Jack? We just get so damn depressed that we cain’t move no more. Then they wrap us up and dump us in a hole. Easy enough, eh?”

Jack snorted as if the answer hadn’t had imagination enough for him and he turned to me. There was only the three of us in the bar. It was near midnight and the weather outside was gettin’ real unfit. A slow night at a slow bar, like I said.

“What about you, Don? How do you want the deed done?”

“Me?” I answered, pretending to think while I driered an unused beer glass. “My daddy always told me I was too downright mean and nasty to die. I’m just gonna cut loose with a big ole fart someday and that’ll be it. I’ll collapse like a sack of Jello and seep away into the ground.”

Chell bent over laughing, and I smiled, but that answer wasn’t enough for Jack.

“C’mon, Don,” he said, pushing. “Really now—how do you want it done?”

I thought for a moment, recalling what my “real” serious answer was. “Oh, I guess I’d want to be cremated, you know. Have my ashes hauled around in some nice Chinese jug—put up a tasteful brass plaque somewhere. Have it read, ‘I knew something like this was going to happen.’”

“There you go,” Jack said, lifting his glass to me. “That’s the spirit. Why be serious about it? Hell, it’s only death, after all. Nothing to worry about.”

Jack shut up for a moment. He was an insurance salesman, and he could be a real pain in the ass, sometimes. Besides, I had been serious—and it hurt a little for him to think I was joking about what I wanted done. But he gulped the rest of his drink down and turned to Chelly for a refill. It was all dusty-windy outside, the hot summer wind picking up the desert sand and playing *attack civilization* with it. A little Rebel Yell went a long way toward giving a man like Jack the courage to face the desert and go home to an unhappy marriage with a semblance of a smile on his face because maybe things ain’t as bad as they look sober. Even if, as Jack did, he lived only a block from the bar.

Chell took his glass and began to pour from the thick-necked R.Y. bottle. When the front door slammed open she spilled some on the

counter. I looked at it for a moment and thought *Damn. That'll take the varnish off.*

And it suddenly grew chillingly hot. I thought it was only the wind and wet and emptiness from the storm outside. Thunder cracked and lightning flashed. I sure wasn't looking forward to the drive up the mountain home.

Everyone's eyes were on the stranger. You could almost see the dust fall off him as he seemed to shake himself. He stomped his feet up and down to knock the wet dirt off them. He was all dressed in black—black boots, black jeans, black shirt, black jacket and a big, shiny black Stetson hat which he held in one hand as he brushed his hair down with the other. He wasn't no local, that was for sure—else I'd have seen him before.

"C'mon in, partner," I said. "Have a seat and a shot to make yourself comfortable."

I like to try to be friendly with newcomers. Jack and Chelly were looking at him like they thought he was a man from Mars or some such. I figured him for an old biker-cowboy, sort of like a tourist, but not in as much of a hurry. Or else he'd just ended up in Satan's Rockpile by accident—some of 'em still did that since they'd moved the freeway.

He stomped on over to the bar and hunkered up onto the chair right next to mine. That gave me a chance to study him a mite closer. He was an odd lookin' fella—all dry skin and chapped bones and angles—road worn—elbows and knees stickin' out like the vanes of a ramshackle windmill. One of those fellas that don't look like they belong in the body they're wearing.

He looked like he hadn't had a decent meal in a week, maybe more. His cheekbones were red and raw and high, and his eyes were sunk tired and deep. Under his hat, his head was nearly bald, with only a few stringy ropes of tangled blond hair hangin' down at the sides and back—long and straggly. A pitiful lookin' cuss, all in all. It looked like he had let himself go a long time ago, bone tired. A little like I felt sometimes.

Chelly sidled on over to him, wiping the counter off with the towel she keeps hangin' out her back pocket and settin' a napkin down in front of him. She was a good ole girl and a crack waitress.

I heard a little tremble in her voice when she asked, "What'll it be?" that made me think this stranger had upset her, or frightened her, though I didn't know why.

"I'll have a beer," the stranger said, "a Grizzly beer."

His voice was low and deep and hoarse, as if he'd been riding for miles and years in the throat-ripping desert heat.

Jack came suddenly to life. "Hey, buddy," he said tentatively. "Where you from?"

The stranger looked at him oddly. "Where am I from?" he asked with a sigh. "Well, I guess you could say I'm from all over. From Texas, originally—but I've been many places since then. All over the world."

"Iz'zat a fact," Jack commented, brightening up. "What do you do for a living?"

The stranger sighed and took a long drink of his beer. I was surprised to see the glass was empty when he set it down on the bar again. I signaled to Chell to fill it again—which she did—while he continued.

"I suppose," he said—a little sadly, I thought, "I suppose you could call me an undertaker, of a fashion. I deal in death, at any rate."

Jack's face beamed like he'd just found a flapping catfish on a muddy bank and was determined to lie and say he'd caught it himself. Course, he'd throw it up in the air, first. Some of Jack's best customers were undertakers.

"Well," he said, "that's a strange coincidence. Just when you came in, we were all talking about that very subject—death and burying, I mean. We were all saying just how it was we all wanted to be laid out and buried." Jack smiled again, rather maliciously, and his gaze rested intensely on the man. "What about you, Mister . . . ah, what'd you say your name was?"

"I didn't," the stranger said, giving out with a short, cackling laugh. "But you may—if you must—call me Spider. Spider Ransome."

"Well, Mister Spider. What about you? How do you want to be done up?"

"Oh, I suppose I'd prefer to be burnt. It seems so clean. There's just something comfortable and purifying about the flames."

"You'd have something in common with Don, then. He feels like he wants to be cremated, too."

The stranger turned to me—there was a hungry, curious look on his face. I stared into his eyes—deep and black—and for a moment, I was afraid. Don't know why, but even after the fear passed I was still uneasy.

"Indeed!" he said. "Is that true?"

"Yep," I answered. "Leastways, I think so. To tell you the truth, I ain't plannin' to die at all, if I can help it. You know? But if I have to, I guess I'd prefer to be cremated. I know I don't relish the idea of bein' planted in the ground—not this damn ground, anyway. I'd be afraid of what might grow from outta me."

The stranger didn't crack a smile or raise an eyebrow—just looked at me all serious-like.

“A commendable attitude, friend. Very sane. But . . . you don’t have to at all, you know.”

“What?” I asked. I was a little high from the three glasses of beer I’d drunk, and I didn’t quite understand what he’d meant. “Don’t have to be planted?”

“No,” he said in a whisper, “you don’t have to die.”

He looked at me expectantly. Chell was just starting to pour Jack another glassful and they were talking to one another, ignoring the stranger and I. Chell caught me looking at her and raised an eyebrow, but I signaled her that it was okay and her attention wandered back to Jack. I leaned closer to the stranger so I could hear him better. “Would you say that again, partner?” I asked him. “I don’t think I heard you quite right.”

He smiled at me and drank the rest of his second beer. He smacked his lips and sighed. “You. Don’t. Have. To. Die,” he said. “Not at all. Not ever.”

I suddenly felt, somehow that I was going to vomit my boots up from my throat. I swallowed hard and looked straight at him. “Whad’ya mean, mister? And what was it you said your name was?”

“My name has no relevance,” he said. “I have been called many things. Been called a son-of-a-bitch and worse. But you, Don—you may call me Death.”

“Shit!” I laughed. “How many bars you been to tonight, partner?”

“This is my first,” he said—and he was dead serious. “This is my first stop of the night. And,” he said, draining the remains in his glass, “with luck, it’ll be the last.”

I tapped him a new glass of Grizzly and he sipped at the froth and sighed.

“I’m tired,” he said. “I’ve been looking for a replacement. Looking for someone—someone just like you—so I could retire.”

“Retire—mister, you’re crazy. Show how much you know. Death don’t retire. Takes a vacation now and then—like in that film, *Death Takes a Holiday*. But retire? Mister, you’re crazier than a rustler with a prairie dog down his pants.”

The stranger just laughed. “No,” he said. “I assure you, Don, I’m not.” He grinned—an impossibly toothy, ear-to-ear grin. The flesh was beginning to flake away from his face like ancient peels of skin from a healing sunburn. His cheekbones shone through, white and shiny, as if he had no blood. I could smell the odor of over-ripe meat and his eyes were turning glassy and gelid—the pupils expanding into blackness.

“Truly,” he said. “I’m old—older than you could ever imagine. Well,



maybe not *that* old, but I have been Death for a long time—a very long time.”

The stranger sighed and seemed to slump in his chair until he looked nearly as old as he claimed to be. He drained the last of his beer and pushed the empty glass away with his spider-leg-thin fingertips.

“It is someone else’s turn, now. It’s time for new blood—new attitudes. Time for me to lay my burdens down, lay my soul down. I have given more service than was asked for, and I am tired of making decisions. I offer it to you—that you become what I am.”

I sputtered for a moment while I caught my breath and calmed my stomach. “And what if I don’t want to take you up on it?” I asked. I looked over at Jack and Chell for help and what I saw pulled me off my stool and set me up on my feet. They were frozen in place—as if time had stopped. Jack’s mouth was open and even the flow of light amber liquid from the R.Y. bottle had solidified in mid-pour. That was what finally convinced me he wasn’t crazy.

“If you refuse,” he said before I had a chance to ask him what the hell was going on, “then I will simply find someone else. I have all the time in the world. It’s not an easy task to find just the right replacement—but I found you. I will find others.” He paused, looked at the watch on his bony wrist, and reached around the bar to draw himself another glass of Grizzly. He drained it in one drink, set it down and continued.

“Before you decide, let me tell you something. In,” he looked once again at his watch, “exactly one-and-a-half minutes, this bar will be hit by the worst lightning bolt of the storm. It will catch fire and everybody within will die. That means you—and Chelly—and Jack, over there. *Everyone.*”

“How can I believe that? Believe *you*?”

The skin had shredded from his face and hands until he was, now, no more than skin and bones. There was a dark shining, just beyond sight, deep within the black eyesockets of his skull. I should have been surprised or scared, but I wasn’t. I’d half been expecting it.

“What would you have me do?” he whispered darkly. “Pull a rabbit from my hat? Disintegrate every piece of glass in the bar? Call up a demon? Should I line the dead up in front of you to testify? I can do these things, and more.”

“No,” I said. Even without the fact that he was all bones now, rattling around in loose black clothes, the sight of Jack and Chell and that stream of Rebel Yell, all frozen in time while I was still moving, was enough to convince me. Either that or *I* had gone crazy. “I believe you,” I said. “I believe you.”

“Then what will your choice be, Don? Would you be Death and live forever—or would you prefer your life to end with those of your friends?”

I thought—harder than I had ever thought before. No kind’a weird shit had ever happened to me—Don DuPress, biker, redneck and all round wastrel. I was just a broken down bar-keep. Stuff like this only happened to people in the Twilight Zone, or on Billy Bob’s Nightmare Theatre—not in real life—and surely not to me.

I didn’t want to die—I knew that real surely. Hardly had to think about that at all. And life after death, Heaven and Hell, a just and wrathful God—all that had hardly been real to me. I’d just tried to get along and take the crap that life handed out as best as I was able. But when a man came into my bar, stopped time, shed his skin, told me he was Death—*The Death*—and told me I only had a minute-and-a-half to live . . . well, *that* I paid attention to.

“I’ll bite,” I said, hardly able to talk but all whispery and quiet-like. “Okay, partner. You got yerself a deal.”

Death sighed. “Thank you,” he said, his voice stronger. The flesh began cohering to his bones again, filling out his clothes and face. I felt a sucking, deep in my soul. “Finally,” he said, smiling. “*Finally*. Thank you.”

I reached to shake the bubbling hand he held out. I touched him. There was a tearing crack, and a buzz that made my brain feel like Jell-o that had set in the icebox too long and turned watery, confused and a little green. I saw Jack and Chelly fall to the floor and lie still. The bottle of Rebel Yell lay on its side, emptying its contents onto the top of the bar while it slowly rocked back and forth.

There was a smell of burnt wood and sulfur. Heat radiated from all around me. My feet were numb and vibrating against the floor as the muscles in my legs and stomach convulsed.

I fell, too. Then there was a shift, a painful, yet comforting jerk that I felt deep in my stomach, and I was standing in the middle of the room, looking down at a body on the floor. It was choking and jerking and clawing at its throat and eyes. When flames began licking the weathered, wooden plank walls of the bar, their light showed me that it was myself I was looking at. It was me—or what I had been, before.

I lifted my hands to my face—touched the skin that clung, newly formed, there, unfeeling of the heat.

I was dressed all in black; black boots, black jeans, black shirt, black jacket. And skinny, like my bones were rattling around in a bloodless shell. It was strange enough, but somehow more comfortable than my own, overweight, rundown, underattractive body had been. I figured I could go far with a thing like this.

I picked my black Stetson hat up from the bar and put it on slowly—adjusted the angle and the sit. I started to bend down to touch my blistering body, lying on the floor—thought better of it—and walked through the flames into the dust and wind outside. He had gotten what he'd wanted, and so had I, sorta.

There was a black Harley in the dirt parking lot, I knew it was mine, now. I walked over to it and as I sat down it barked once and started. It ran with a deep purr, quiet and sneaky-like. I pulled the clutch in and kicked it into gear—grabbed a handful of the accelerator and let 'er rip. The tires lifted from the ground and I was soaring in the air, flying. The bike and I stretched out, molded together, and I was coasting on a multitude of bright, glowing lines of energy like a freeway of spinning stars.

But I knew where I was going. I didn't need no road signs. I knew what I had to do. And I knew, now, that I had a long, *long* time to do it. I was Death—and Death rides the sky forever.

# The Man Who Did Tricks With Glass

Ron Wolfe

*Ron Wolfe was born on September 14, 1945 in North Platte, Nebraska—the celebrated hometown of Buffalo Bill Cody and where, Wolfe says, his grandmother once saw Buffalo Bill ride a white horse into a saloon. While he was too young to join up with Cody, Wolfe did follow in the same line of work as his father, writer Ed Wolfe, whose stories were popular in Collier's, The Saturday Evening Post, American, and other magazines of the '40s.*

*Ron Wolfe now lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he is a feature writer, movie reviewer, and cartoonist for The Tulsa Tribune. He has had stories published in Twilight Zone Magazine, Night Cry, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, and Stardate. Wolfe has co-written one novel, Old Fears (with John Wooley), which is set in Oklahoma and is currently under option to Paramount Pictures. He is at work on a couple of other novels, one suspense and the other straight horror. This story, from the final issue of Stardate, was begun some years ago as an attempt "to write a Charles Beaumont-type story," Wolfe says; Stardate credited it with "a sharp Bradbury touch." Good company, but the finished product stands very well as a Ron Wolfe story.*

THE METAL CLICK-CLACK studs in the soles of his boots rattled like hailstones against the mirrored floor under the mirrored ceiling adjoining the mirrored walls. "Joobie! And o-yes, but this is the place," he said to himself and himself and himself.

"The place of the Mirrormaster, o-yes," the Sec-robot machine echoed Birdie Rawson's voice from the mirror-topped desk in the center of the room. "Count yourself reflected here 1,114 times."

Some where just simple reflections. Some overlapped. Some wavered. Some made him different, in different ways. Evil and innocent, childlike, ancient, scarred, healed.

Birdie Rawson, however, lost count at himself times 53 when the mirror-faced panel to his left, or maybe right, or possibly it was behind

him—anyway, went *swipp-p-ppp!* and opened, with a flash of light that made the diamond-faceted walls glitter. And the room count doubled.

"You! . . ." Rawson peered through eyes of ice and water, into the chromium brilliance. Black-gloved and balding, he clapped like a seal. "You are real-o, after all."

"I am real, and I am worn out, Mr. Rawson," the Mirrormaster said. The silver of his hair shone bright as glass. "I meant to be retired."

"But for me, you are here."

J. Tipton Witt, last of the Mirrormasters, took his place behind the desk, sat down and made the rings on his fingers sparkle, drumming on the desktop.

"Yes, Mr. Rawson," he said, "for you."

"In the interest of easing these tensions between us . . ." Rawson said, and withdrew a sealed envelope from one of several zippered pockets that ornamented the front of his jacket. He placed the envelope on the desktop.

"I am holding back nothing," Rawson said. "See for yourself."

The Mirrormaster slid the envelope, barely touching it, into a slot that opened almost invisibly. A whirring, a grinding sound followed.

"I don't need to see," the Mirrormaster said. "I don't believe you."

"Most people don't," Rawson said. "But I am not hurt. It helps me to get what I want."

"What you want is not the first of our discussions," the Mirrormaster said. "What *I* want is. And what I want is this, simply said, Mr. Rawson: to be left alone by the likes of you. I don't give a twit for your blackmail. I am not the least concerned about the case that you've managed to fabricate against me. What does interest me . . . is that it must have cost you for lies almost what I charge for mirrors."

Rawson nodded. "I pay for the best."

"And that kind of payment, Mr. Rawson, is what I need for purpose of disappearing. Understand: it is going to cost you unreasonably, whatever you want done."

Again, Rawson nodded happily, and his head bobbed back at him from 1,114 different angles.

"Moreover," said the Mirrormaster, "since this, in fact, will be the last job I take, I do dearly hope you can make it something of a challenge." He gestured palms up toward Rawson, as if to have something cold and oozy dropped into his hands. "Now, what can I do for you?"

"I had in mind, o-yes—something for the bedroom," Rawson said.

The Mirrormaster said flatly, "Oh."

"Something . . . something different . . . something joobie."

The Mirrormaster slumped. "In that case, Mr. Rawson, be it known that you have forced me out of retirement to perform the equivalent of playing with my toes. Something for the bedroom. Pfah!"

Rawson click-clacked across the mirrored floor to lean against the desk, with his California plum nose thrust into the face of the Mirrormaster and his earrings dancing a ballet for silk sheets and fake fur. "So tell me what you can do for me," he said.

The Mirrormaster snorted again. "Anything." He pushed Rawson back. "I can make you look two feet taller and muscled as if you were carved out of ivory. I can put shapes on her to give you thoughts even you would be ashamed of. Again, pfah! You can't believe what old stuff this is to me."

But Rawson pressed in. "And you could make her float like a sea nymph out of the sea?"

The Mirrormaster nodded and bit off his thumb nail.

"And you could make six of her, and three of me, and two of us both?"

The Mirrormaster coughed and spat.

"And you could make her seem nothing but soft, questing lips?"

"All of those," the Mirrormaster said, "in one afternoon. Easy installation. Name the day."

The corners of Rawson's mouth bent up slowly then, like something crawling out from under his mustache. "Then if you can do all that, glass man," he said, "maybe you can do the thing I want done."

To which J. Tipton Witt sighed a breath of cold oatmeal and rain. "What I have always hated about this particular facet of my work, Mr. Rawson," he said, "is that it gives me no choice but to find out, in sordid detail, your idea of a good time in bed."

"Well-o . . ." Rawson glanced back and forth and up and down, and his own look of sudden distrust ricocheted back at him. "We are alone?" he asked.

"We are."

Slowly, Rawson loosened another of the zippered pockets. He withdrew from it a badly-taken photograph, which he placed in front of the glass man.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" Rawson said.

The Mirrormaster did not answer immediately. But his face changed in ways that might have been imperceptible except in such a place of mirrors and lights. The black-dot pupils of the Mirrormaster's eyes, already small, narrowed as if to blind him to the sight of the photograph.

He turned the photo face-down with a hand that might not have been

seen to tremble, except for the unsteady glimmer of mirrored light against so many rings.

Rawson flipped the picture—*snap/slap!*—again, to confront the Mirrormaster. “Her name was Lela,” Rawson said. “As femies go, I miss her terribly. Lovely, don’t you think? Even after . . .”

“I don’t want to know.” The Mirrormaster’s voice cracked. It broke like crystal. “How you did . . . to her . . .”

Rawson edged in closer. “Call it, on my part, a fascination with gadgetry.”

The Mirrormaster flinched back in his chair, wheezing at the smell of joobie-joobie seeds on Rawson’s breath. He snapped the crystal button on the Sec-robot, and said, “Mr. Rawson will be leaving now.” And to Rawson: “Tragically, there are limits to what I can do with glass. I cannot build a prison of glass that would hold you.”

Rawson clubbed an arm across the desk, smashing the machine. “Neg-o, I’m staying, and you are going to listen to me, glass man.” He smiled then—a smile of bloodied teeth from where the seeds had cut into the gums.

“I want her returned to me, glass man,” Rawson said. “Not alive again. I didn’t like her all that much alive. But I want the image of her—there in the mirrors, in the glass, beckoning to me. I want the reflection of me, the reflection of her, intertwined. You see . . . I wasn’t finished with her.”

The Mirrormaster stood. He turned as if to look away from Birdie Rawson, but the mirrors allowed no such avoidance. “I am . . . finished with you,” the Mirrormaster said.

Rawson persisted, “You said you wanted a challenge.”

“Yes, but . . .” And, for a moment, again, the face of the Mirrormaster shifted—tightened ever so subtly, to an expression that could have been read as fear, or surprise, or contempt. But not disinterest.

“Can you do it?” Rawson pressured.

“I can . . . tinker with reflections, Mr. Rawson. What you ask, is to conjure a ghost.”

“So the answer to my question—the one-word answer from the last of the glass men—is a big phoo!” Rawson said.

“I didn’t say that,” the Mirrormaster countered. “What I mean is, it hasn’t been tried.”

“So, I tell you,” Rawson said: “Try. Dare. Plunge. Be, not the follower, but the artist.”

J. Tipton Witt ruffled his silvery curls like the idea itself was a bug in his hair. “And if I don’t? . . .”

"I will go out and tell the world what a fake you are, and it will have the ring of truth to it, glass man."

"And if I do? . . ."

"Then, I will see to it that you become rich, revered—and rid of me. I will put all three in writing to your complete satisfaction."

Silence filled the room like mirrors.

The Mirrormaster again contemplated the woman's photograph.

"I can see in her eyes. She died hating you," the Mirrormaster said. "So will I."

But he took from the desk drawer a long, silver-colored pencil and a pad of paper, and began drawing arrows and angles and little dotted lines criss-crossing this way and that, and muttering to himself about "angle of incidence" and "angle of deviation."

"By 'deviation,'" Rawson said, "I hope you mean nothing personal."

"Get out," the Mirrormaster ordered.

"Joobie! O-yes, I will be anxious to hear from you." Rawson said, and his boots, departing, rattled applause for the work so auspiciously begun.

It was a week later that J. Tipton Witt motioned a crew of workmen into Birdie Rawson's bedroom, and the door closed.

After a while, the workmen left, but the Mirrormaster stayed inside, and the door closed again.

Rawson rapped and called, "When can I see?" But all he heard from the other side was the sound of shattering glass.

And when the door finally did edge open, casting a flicker of brilliance into the hallway, the Mirrormaster squeezed through in the smallest space he could. He slammed and locked the door shut behind him. His eyes were cobwebbed with red; his mouth ticked and trembled.

"Yes? . . ." Rawson rushed him. "Is it done? Is she there? I have certain . . . plans . . . I am eager to put in motion."

Bits of Birdie Rawson reflected off the beads of sweat that streamed from the Mirrormaster's brow.

"Something . . . not her," the Mirrormaster said. "What I made in there, in the glass . . . I don't know where it came from. I can't describe it, you wouldn't want it, and I'm leaving," the Mirrormaster said, trying to edge past Rawson.

Rawson's black-gloved seal hands clasped the old man's throat before J. Tipton Witt could take another step away. "Neg-o, you don't, glass man. I paid you plenty. What you're telling me is that it needs more work, and I'm telling you more work is what it's going to get," and he shoved the Mirrormaster, *hard*, against the door.

J. Tipton Witt saw Rawson's fingers clenching and unclenching and



smelled the joobie-joobie sweetness on Rawson's breath stronger than ever, and he unlocked the door and eased back inside.

Rawson went about his business the rest of the day, ignoring the screams and the shattering sounds.

And when the door opened again, there was J. Tipton Witt, shaking and tattered, arms and face criss-crossed with delicate, bleeding cuts, and all the same—very much the Mirrormaster. "I have done it," he said. "You can see for yourself."

Rawson jumped for the door, but J. Tipton Witt stopped him with an outstretched hand. "The thing is," J. Tipton Witt said, "I still don't know how. I still don't like it. I'm still leaving. And my advice to you, Mr. Rawson, is to do the same."

Rawson pushed him aside and went in.

Rawson's voice drifted out of the room then like soft clouds and soap suds. "Ohh-h-h-h. O-my. It is her, glass man. And so many of her. And so many angles, and she is beckoning to me, glass man. Ahhh! . . ."

The Mirrormaster did not follow, did not watch, only called into the room. "And does she float like a sea nymph out of the sea?"

"O-yes!"

"And are there six of her, and three of you, and two of you both?"

"Even more, and even better."

"And does she seem nothing but soft, questing lips?"

"Questing . . ."

"And what of her touch, Mr. Rawson? What of that?"

The answer was silence.

The Mirrormaster closed the door. He walked to the end of the hallway, almost there before the door clicked open behind him.

The voice that stopped him was not Rawson's. It was the whisper of slowly splintering glass, taking the shape of a single word.

He turned toward the sound.

The word repeated—"Mirrormaster"—out of the lips that bore the glint of ice.

Turning, the Mirrormaster saw himself reflected in the silvered glass of Lela's eyes. She touched him, gently, on the cheek. He felt the nail cut, knowing it would leave a scar as fine and white as a length of thread.

"I could only reflect what was there of you," the Mirrormaster said. "Hatred . . ."

She smiled at him, lips glistening. "But, oh, won't you say that I'm lovely?"

She twirled for him, naked, and almost transparent.

"Lovely," the Mirrormaster agreed.

"Then, come." She took his hand. It bled within her grasp. "See the rest of what you've done."

She led the way back to the bedroom, softly pushing the door open.

The room stood silent, empty, and yet filled with those gaping-mouthed screams that came out of the mirrors.

"You see, Mirrormaster?" Lela said. "You could, after all, build a prison of glass that would hold him."

"A prison . . ."

"But not a lonely one." Lela touched a glass-edged nail to the tip of her tongue—a thousand nails, a thousand tongues. A thousand Lelas, intertwined, reflected from the mirrored floor under the mirrored ceiling adjoining the mirrored walls.

She smiled a radiant, lovely smile, a smile of the coldest white.

The Mirrormaster grasped a workman's hammer from the floor. He struck the wall blindly, ignoring the sting of slivered glass. And again, and again: the impact of a thousand gleaming hammers in the hands of a thousand silver-haired madmen.

The glass cracked; it shattered; it fell.

And every broken, bloodied shard of it, every large, every small, every sharp-edged reflection—all of them, Birdie Rawson—kept on screaming.



with the wheelchair cases. "We're supposed to be strictly Protective Custody and Placement. But since the Governor cut the Social Services budget we get a lot of Disabled, Drug Rehab, the overflow from Juvie, you name it. They'd better not send us any more. We're already sleeping six to a room."

"My Erin's not one of these," Casey told him.

"You never know," he said.

Last off were three squat, overweight, moon-faced kids. They held hands and laughed and stuck out their long tongues at each other, as happy as babies. Lori smiled at them and waved. It wouldn't be so bad to be a Special Child, she thought. In some ways they're better off. They get to have fun all the time. They don't have any worries.

"Well?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Ma'am? You don't see her?" When Mom pursed her lips at him and jutted out her jaw he said, "Let me check the Pop Sheet. There's a bench back by the office, if you'd like to sit down." He started away, then had another idea. "Why don't you join us for dinner? I'll ask the kitchen to make up a couple of extra plates."

"No, thank you."

"Mom. . .!" said Lori when he had gone.

"You hush," said Casey. "We don't need any favors from him."

Lori brooded, her stomach growling. "What did you mean when you said we only came to visit?"

"What?"

"I said we came to get Erin, and you said—"

Casey sighed. "I'm trying to decide what would be best for her. It's not easy."

"What's best for you, you mean."

Before her mother could say anything else, Lori left her and walked over to the playing field and sat in one of the swings.

This was the time of day she liked best, with the noisy hours past, the dust settled, the air clear. Above the trees the sky was the color of a deep ocean, and the evening star was showing on the horizon. Venus, she remembered from her book.

All the anger and resentment, built up inside her during the endless ride, left her like a long breath and blew away with the breeze that moved through the trees. For now she was empty and alone. She saw the outline of the playground equipment nearby, things she had left behind on the last day of school. She was surprised at how small they seemed to her, and wondered how such childish toys had ever supported her weight.

The breeze grew stronger, singing in the chains of the swing. She held them taut but they still vibrated in her fingers. They began to rattle. She could not stop them.

It was not the breeze, she realized. She was not alone. There was something loose in the ground, and it was running out all around her.

She looked at the long shadows growing by the slide and the merry-go-round and the jungle gym. Were they moving?

She saw her mother waiting in a pool of yellow light outside the chickenwire glass of the office. The rumbling was spreading, moving closer. Couldn't her mother hear it?

Then Lori saw the bobbing silhouette of a runner, arms and legs pumping spastically like the angled appendages of a monstrous spider. He passed the walkway and was lost again in the darkness.

Lori stood uncertainly, the links icy in her hands.

"Forty-two, forty-three, fifty-seven, ninety-nine. . ."

"Hello?" she said. "Is anybody there?"

"Got to keep count," he called above the thumping rhythm. "Did I break the record?"

"I—I don't know."

His silhouette passed closer as he circled the field, perilously near the tetherball pole. If his foot struck it he would lose his balance and go sprawling, probably straight into the monkey bars. It was too dark for running. Didn't he know that?

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I'm the 1500 meter. What are you?"

"I'm not anything," said Lori. "Why are you doing that?"

"Got to practice."

"You better be careful. It's getting pretty dark."

"Not me. I know the way perfect. Even at night. What's your name?"

"Lori. What's yours?"

The thumping slowed. She heard a panting close by. Then a teenage boy was standing before her. He held his chin down as he gasped for breath, his chest heaving.

"I won," he said. "My best time."

"That's nice," she said. She saw his skinny bare arms glistening with perspiration, his oddly bent hands. "Um, for what?"

"For the Olympics," he said. He collapsed into the swing next to hers. "I went to the Fair. I didn't get to practice. Did you go to the Fair?"

"Me? I just got here."

"From the Fair?"

"From Los Angeles."

"Is that far away?"

"I guess so."

"No, it's not. I saw you before. You live in Green Cottage."

What was wrong with him? She changed the subject. "Why are you practicing for the 1500 meter? That's over already. It was today."

"Next Saturday," he said, swinging slowly. "I'm sixteen. Are you?"

She laughed. "No, silly."

As her eyes adjusted she made out the logo on his sweat-soaked shirt. It was the same red-white-and-blue design she saw everywhere, except that his had one word that was different. Like the counselors' shirts. At last she understood. *SPECIAL Olympics*. For the handicapped. She had seen a TV movie about it once. She smiled broadly.

"That's great," she told him, "really great. You'll win, I know. You're a good runner."

"I can run faster than anybody. I get the medal."

"I bet you do." She saw his hairy legs sticking out, his knobby knees, his worn tennis shoes with cartoon characters on the laces. She liked him very much. "I know who you saw," she said. "It was my sister. We sort of look alike. Where's Green Cottage?"

He pointed to the corner bungalow. "If you get lost, wait where you are. Miss Shelby will take you back to your room. Don't wander around after lights out, and no TV after ten o'clock."

Lori's mother heard the conversation and came over. "Who are you talking to out here?" she said.

"Um, a friend."

"What's your friend's name?"

"Did you see me?" he said. "I got the medal."

"Next Saturday," said Lori. "I wish I could be there."

"You will be," he said. "Next Saturday. Yesterday."

"Has the whole world gone crazy?" said Casey.

"Didn't they find Erin?" Lori asked her.

"They don't know anything. They said they were going to look for her, but I don't believe it. I don't believe anything anymore. They don't care if Erin's run off again."

"Is that what they said?"

"They don't have to. I should have known. It's something she learned from her father."

"I know where she is," said Lori. "Wait one minute."

"I'm tired of waiting," said Casey. "I'm not going to wait for anyone, ever again."

"No, really, Sit right here."

"Why should I? Where are you going?"

"I'll be right back, I promise. Talk to him, Mom. He's nice. Really."

Lori left the swings and hurried across the field.

Most of the bungalows were empty now for dinner, but the lights had been left on. Through the windows she saw that some rooms were strung with crepe paper daisy chains and watercolor paintings, others with pictures of baby animals or rock stars. The ones with heavy metal posters, she knew, belonged to the boys.

Inside a dayroom, several girls her own age lounged on sofas and chairs, staring listlessly at a television set. They had already changed into their bathrobes and fuzzy slippers and were settling in for an evening of MTV. But of course Erin was not among them. This was not her building.

As she cut across to the corner bungalow, Lori looked back and saw her mother sitting resignedly in the swing next to the boy from the Special Olympics. From here she couldn't tell if they were talking. She hoped so.

Green Cottage was darker than the others. The older girls had covered their windows with rainbow stickers and tissue paper arranged in stained glass patterns. Lori managed to see into at least part of every room. With so many record album covers scattered over beds and the piles of underwear collecting in corners, they reminded her of Erin's room at home. But Erin was not in any of these, nor in the dayroom at the end.

She stood outside, her own face reflected in the glass. It was easy to imagine herself living here. She wanted her own room to have unicorns and stuffed animals and colored lampshades, too. After a while all the Green Cottage girls returned and were accounted for except Erin. When no one noticed Lori and invited her in she moved on, dejected.

How could she tell Mom?

On her way back to the field, she saw the young counselor who had tried to help Mom out of the car. He was coming this way. He had a jaunty way of walking that made her feel good. With each step the keys around his neck jingled like music.

"Hi," she said.

"What are you doing out of your room?"

"I don't have one."

"What's your color? You're in Green Cottage, aren't you?"

"Yes. I mean, no. I mean, I'm not really here. It's my sister. Don't you remember me? I came here with my mother to—"

"Oh, yeah. How're you doing? Did you find that sister of yours?"

"No. Did you?"

"Me? I thought Lissa was going to track her down. Well, she'll turn up. They always do. Tell your mom not to worry."

He started away.

"Hey, where's your mom now?"

"Over there, I think." She tipped her head to the darkness.

"What's she going to do about that tie-rod? I can give her the number of the garage in town, if she wants. Does she have the Auto Club?"

"Um, I'll ask."

It was too dark now to make out anything from the edge of the field. As she drew closer she heard the Olympic runner's flat-footed gait start up again. He couldn't stop practicing.

Had they made friends yet? Even if they had, Lori should come up with something to say to keep her mother from getting too depressed. When she was little Mom had done that for her, reading her stories so that she would not be afraid. And now Lori would do the same for her. She hoped it would help.

She tried to think of something interesting from *The Book of Uncommon Knowledge*. The divorce rate, for example. It was fifty-one point seven percent now. Did Mom know that? She probably did. How about the one that said your hair and skin keep on growing after you die? If that was true, she thought, how could you ever know whether anyone was dead or alive? How long would it take to be sure?

"Mom?"

She let the footsteps pass once before she left the path, moving cautiously until the swings were lined up against the office on the other side. They were empty, but one set of chains was moving. Had Mom been sitting in that one?

At that moment the sound of running feet, magnified into a heartbeat between the buildings, was interrupted suddenly by a dull thud, followed by the ringing slap of flesh against steel. Lori had a mental picture of a wild horse tripped and brought to its knees, the way they did it in cowboy movies. Then there was a kicking and thrashing and a terrible high-pitched wail.

"Mom?"

Lori rushed in, her own heart drumming in her ears.

Somebody in the office heard, too, because the outside lights went on. And she saw.

The runner lay crumpled on the ground near the monkey bars, clutching one leg. A piece of bone stuck out below the kneecap. His face was twisted in pain and his mouth was open. Lori's mother was bending over him.



“Mom, what are you doing?”

Casey looked up. Her eyes were wild. She recognized Lori and stopped her fists. She lowered her hands and sat back, blinking at them as if they were someone else’s, and pressed them to her face. When she took them down her expression was the same flat mask as always.

“It’s all right now,” she said. Her face quivered and changed once more, then to the mask, then back again. She could no longer control it.

Lori went to the boy. “What happened? Are you hurt bad?”

“Bad. . .!” he blubbered, his tears falling like dew on the grass. “T-t-tripped . . .”

Lori turned on her mother. “What did you *do*?”

“I asked him to help me find Erin,” Casey said. “And he started to run. That’s all any of them know how to do. They can’t wait to get away. But that’s all over. Come with me now, baby.”

“No, Mom, you’re wrong! I’m not your baby anymore.” Lori began to cry. It was the first time since Dad left. “Don’t you understand?” she sobbed. “We’re not going anywhere!”

Some of the counselors came out and tended the boy, as Lori’s mother told them a story about what had happened. They nodded solemnly. No one argued with her. How could they? It was her word against the boy’s. But Mom told the story again just to be sure. As she walked away with them, her feet made a funny zigzag pattern on the ground, as if she did not know where she was going.

Lori waited in the dark, on the grass, crying and crying. Now that she had started she was afraid she would never stop. And that she would never know.

## Take the "A" Train

Wayne Allen Sallee

*Wayne Allen Sallee created some controversy in The Year's Best Horror Stories: XIV last year with his story, "Rapid Transit." "Take the 'A' Train" is a follow-up to that story—an exploration of some alternative interpretations of "Rapid Transit" which Sallee says he had not considered at the time he wrote the story.*

*Born September 19, 1959 in Chicago, Wayne Allen Sallee has taken the small press field by storm and force. By the first day in 1987 he had had 320 poems accepted for publication and had sold twenty-four horror stories. His work has appeared in Grue, New Blood, Twisted, Sycophant, Gas, 1130 Club, Back Brain Recluse, Dreams & Nightmares, Portents, Döppelgänger, and dozens more. As I've earlier commented, the small press field is intense. Sallee resides in Chicago, where he is working on his second novel, The Holy Terror, while his first, Paingrin, stalks a publisher.*

CASSADY SPENT October in his dingy, three-room hovel, submerged in his own guilt, self-exiled from the city. He ventured out rarely, and then only for food. His phone was disconnected on the twentieth, three days after the girl's murder. ComEd hadn't taken care of the lights yet, so he was able to spend the days watching television, safe from the prying eyes of the neighborhood. He watched situation comedies from the 1960s, mostly shows with father figures.

The scar on his hand was healing nicely. And on Halloween, Cassidy stayed in the corner tavern for three beers and nobody had asked him any questions. That made him feel better, feel as if he could tackle the world again.

When he went home from the bar, Cassidy spent long, quiet moments contemplating the Terri Welles centerfold on his bedroom wall. He decided he would talk to Sarah about the murder the next afternoon.

The first of November came in with a freezing downpour, but the rain did not deter Cassidy from waiting the half-hour for the train to Sarah's

flat on the north side. The four-car El was delayed by what the conductor said was a police and gang-related incident, and when it finally did arrive, icicles were forming in Cassady's beard. He cursed an elderly woman for not boarding the train faster. She had begun to say something in return, but stopped when she saw the hatred in his eyes.

He stood commando style against the sliding, graffiti-washed doors. Let someone try and make him move out of the way! He scanned the faces of the others in his car carefully, but did not see the killer's face or anybody else's that was recognizable. This was a city of strangers. He would leave soon, yes oh yes. No one knew him anymore. He would go to Boston or . . . or New York City. It was a grim resolution.

The train wormed underground, avoiding the rich bankers and pretty secretaries who lived and/or worked on Rush Street and the Gold Coast. Cassady knew in his mind that it was not always this way; the fatcats and moneymakers had forced the city government to change the tracks to fit their needs. But, Cassady didn't think the train was an eyesore. The pretty stewardesses and waitresses who lived on Sandburg Terrace could fuck themselves. He was glad that the Tylenol Killer had been able to kill at least one of them. Whoever he had been, if Cassady had known him, he would have told the killer to put cyanide in *all* the bottles in the Walgreen's on Rush Street. Then they all would have died. Forty minutes later, Cassady stepped off the train at Addison. He was humming Van Morrison's "Brown-Eyed Girl."

Picking up a copy of the Tribune's Green Streak at a corner kiosk on Waveland that smelled like crap, Cassady read that a suspect had been questioned as the El Murderer. Cassady was shocked to find out that Quita McLean's knife-killing was the third in the last four weeks. Why hadn't he read about the others? Were the papers covering this up like they did everything else? Were there people out there who maybe had witnessed one of the other murders like he had? Maybe seen the killer's face? Would they be sympathetic toward him or hate him?

Cassady pressed his fists to his forehead, dropping the paper. Two Hispanics in leather blazers stared at him from across the street.

Witnesses . . . the thought made him shiver. He was getting sick again, just like Martin Balsam in "The Taking of Pelham One, Two, Three." This city was killing him. Sarah would help ease his suffering, though, like she always had.

Wait. Someone was watching him from behind.

Turning quickly, Cassady saw no one. Perhaps the watcher was some kind of acrobat and was now hiding behind the newspaper stand? Turning back, he saw the blond man staring, white hairs sticking out of

his beard like weeds. Red veins quavered in his eyes. Cassady suddenly realized that he was staring into mirrored glass.

He walked toward Broadway in the quickening darkness, leaves piled like ashes all around him. Cassady had known Sarah since his freshman year at the University of Illinois on Polk Street. 1980. Geez, six years that seemed like yesterday. He still couldn't find a decent job.

Sarah had tawny hair and almond brown doe eyes. Cassady felt himself getting an erection. Once, when he had awakened after dozing on the bus and dreaming of Sigourney Weaver, Cassady was embarrassed to discover that he was the proud owner of a raging hard-on and at least three bus passengers were aware of it. They had tittered amongst themselves, thinking everything was funny as usual. If only more people could be concerned with what was happening in the real world. After the bus incident, Cassady learned to sleep with a copy of the Trib over his lap, even if he was only daydreaming.

Sarah had taken up nursing after graduation. He had dropped out in his junior year at the U of I. She still loved him, though. The suspected killer's name was David Spellman, age 27, unemployed. Chicago's Finest found him in an alleyway behind a Winchell's Donut House. He was in the process of raping a fifteen-year-old girl. He had a broken Coke bottle in one hand, and still had not actually confessed to anything. Cassady reeled off the stats from the newspaper article as if he had been reading the back of a Topps baseball card. He did not realize he was talking out loud.

He knew them all, though. Manson. Speck. Son of Sam. And Gacy, just five Christmases ago. What was that joke . . . Gacy's favorite country and western song: I'm walking the floor over youuu . . . His voice trailed in mock falsetto, echoing madly in the shadowed corners of New Town. Some people thought the gays deserted it, deserved getting picked up by Gacy and shown the old handcuff trick. Cassady didn't think so, though. Gays were different, but that was no reason to kill them.

The paper also had a short piece about the man who had found Quita McLean's body. It was on page three of the Chicagoland section, next to an ad for Field Days.

Sarah Dunleavy lived in a second-floor walkup at 1123 Wolfram. Wrigley Field was a short distance away, and as he trudged toward Sarah's block, Cassady imagined opening day of the '86 season. Maybe this would be the year the Cubs would take it. He remembered all the times his mother had taken him to the weekend games with the Cardinals and the Mets. The smell of hot dogs and pizza, watching couples hold

hands, yelling when Banks or Santo hit one out on Sheffield. Songs on the radio . . .

(Do you remember when, we used to sing, shala la la) Well, shala la la, here he was. He scratched nervously at his right hand before ringing the bell.

(Whatever happened, to Tuesday and So Slow?) He wondered whatever had happened to Van Morrison, the Dave Clark Five, Paul Revere & The Raiders.

“Denny!” Sarah said buoyantly in the open doorway. She was wearing Levi’s and a loose-fitting burnt-orange sweater. The sleeves were pushed up around her elbows. When they kissed, Cassidy felt that she still wasn’t wearing a bra. “Bet you’re hungry after that long rain ride, huh?”

“Yea.” Cassidy tried not to sound distracted. “You bet.”

He sat at the kitchen table while Sarah busied herself with the dinner. She turned now and then to ask a question, her hair falling across her face. He was happy that she was not wearing makeup or nail polish. That was for the sluts who worked downtown.

He made small talk about the weather and his job interviews and then stared at the flowered wallpaper until Sarah walked to his seat with the prepared meal.

(Countin’ flowers on the wall, that don’t bother me at all)

They walked together into the living room and sat near the television. Sarah placed a steaming plate of roast beef and mashed potatoes on the tray next to him. She poured a Pepsi into his glass. He watched it fizz, as if something mystical.

“Hey, thanks,” Cassidy said, smoothing his shirt.

Sarah sat back on the sofa and watched him eat. Using the remote control, she turned on the television. He was grateful when Sarah switched from the news to a rerun of *Barney Miller*.

Cassidy slowly cut into the meat. It was rare, his favorite. The knife scraped against the ceramic plate, and the juice sprayed finely onto the sleeve;

(The juice erupted from the woman’s breast and soaked his sweater) he watched it spread into the cotton blend like a hideous sunset, pushing his plate away in disgust;

(Because she was dead and his hand o god his hand held the bloody knife)

and Sarah looked away from one of Dietrich’s witticisms to Inspector Luger at the sudden jangling of the plate.

“This steak is too damn rare,” Cassidy spat, needing something to say.

"Denny," Sarah exclaimed, wiping her hands down the sides of her jeans. "You always order it that way everywhere you go. You know how the waitresses all think you're some kind of werewolf!"

"The waitresses don't know shit!" Cassady hissed.

"Denny, what the *hell* is the matter with you," Sarah said, concerned lines finding their proper place on her face.

Cassady's hands played twister with his hair. His eyes were squeezed shut. Minutes passed thickly.

Finally, with Cassady staring at the powder-blue carpet, and Sarah looking at him, studying him, the entire time, he spoke. He explained that he was having a rough time finding a job since his unemployment ran out, and that his shoulder was sore again because of the damp weather. Sarah understood him well. And oh how she loved him. Soon, they were laughing about the new Woody Allen film, and about snoopy old Mrs. Spinoza next door. They talked about dinner on the lakefront that summer, Christmas shopping, and the taverns on Division Street. Then Cassady's face clouded over as fast as a schizoid's, as if he had just remembered why he had come.

"You know, Sarah," he said softly. She stopped smiling. "Well, I sort of knew this girl once. She worked down the mall from me when I was at the Jeans place in the mall. A few of the girls at the store used to go to lunch with her."

Cassady was speaking in a detached way, strangely formal, as one might speak to an old friend at a wake. Sarah studied his face more closely, looking for some clue as to his behavior. There was none.

"It's been almost two years since the night she didn't come home," he continued. "She was a lot like me, you know. She really loved the city. Not being afraid to go out at night like just about everybody else."

"I'm not afraid," Sarah interrupted softly.

"I know." Cassady didn't hear what she said. "I guess that's why I still think about her,

(sometimes I'm overcome thinking about it, making love in the green grass)

even though I only met her once or twice. She reminded me so much of myself. I don't know . . . it's hard, Sarah. It's hard to explain why I love it here so much. Yea, I know. You can't walk around smiling without people thinking you're gay or retarded or something.

"But, let me tell you something, Sarah

(behind the stadium with you)

on a day when everybody and *everything* spits in my face, I love it here that much more

(my brown-eyed girl)

"It was December. This one girl I knew, Karen—she was manager of my store at the time—she told me how her and Vicki used to sit in front of Foxmoor's, and that's what they had done that last day, eating lunch on the floor because it was so crowded with Christmas shoppers, and they were throwing fries at each other, making faces at the shoppers. And that night, Vicki went to a bar and never came home.

"This wasn't in a bar in a rough neighborhood or something," Cassady said, shaking his head. "It was in Palos Heights, for chrissakes. Four blocks from her home."

More silence. A car honked outside. The door upstairs slammed distantly.

"They found her in January. This farmer up near the Wisconsin border let his dog out one morning, and . . . this is how the paper put it: 'After several minutes of digging in the snow, the dog ran proudly back to its master, the head of the missing girl jauntily dangling from his mouth.' Jauntily dangling. Jesus, can you believe that? The coroner put the time of death at about a week before that. There were pieces of her all over the field."

His hands were still pressed tightly against his skull. Cassady made claws out of his fingers and dug them into the creases around his forehead, as if trying to re-open a line of sutures that held back a slow trickle of mistakenly discarded memories. He thought of the blood dripping down Quita McLean's thigh, black in the glow of the streetlamps. Just like the others. He did not mention that he had asked Vicki out to dinner, and that she had refused, placing him in the class of all the other macho animals. Sarah didn't need to know that.

Sarah had begun to speak when Cassady lifted his head. The blood vessels stood out in his cheeks from where his palms had pushed against the skin. Several thin red scratches ran across his forehead. My God, Denny used to have laugh lines, Sarah thought.

The clock behind Cassady read ten o'clock. Over two hours had passed. A rerun of "M\*A\*S\*H" was on the television.

"No," Cassady said with a tone of finality, knowing what Sarah was going to ask. Oh he knew her only too well. Women were all alike, really. "They thought it was her boyfriend, but they couldn't be sure."

He stopped talking then. He was thinking about other, more private things. Sarah reached across the distance between them and took his hand, wiping the blood that was on his nails, soothing him just like she did in that dream thousands of years before. Yes, she knew him well. Too well.

Cassady knew this, knew that it was only a matter of time before the cops came and asked her questions. He really had only one choice.

Sarah slowly realized the change that was occurring in Cassady. He looked too calm. Too serene. Instead of wondering why he had brought up all these memories, tragic as they were, she felt chilled.

Denny's eyes were different, she thought.

"Denny, I—"

"Sarah, wait. Do you remember a few years ago, it was around the time of the Humboldt Park riots, that girl who was raped near the Belmont El?"

"Remember that guy, he was a clerk in a record store, and he tried to help, and the guy stabbed him to death? . . ."

"Denny, you can't blame yourself for what happened to that girl at work," Sarah said. "You weren't even with her the night it happened, you couldn't possibly have saved her."

She shivered in the semi-darkness of the room.

"You're right about the city, though. You can only pray it doesn't happen to you."

"Now, c'mere."

She pulled him toward her, burying his face into her blonde hair.

"You know," Cassady spoke into Sarah's breasts. "I'm not like the others . . . like that old bag Spinoza next door."

"I'm not afraid of the streets."

"Nobody said you were, Denny," Sarah said, slowing rocking him back and forth in her arms. "C'mon. I'll make you a drink."

She stood up, ruffling Cassady's hair as if he were a child's plaything, and walked across the room to the small bar that stood against the wall. There were only two bottles on the shelf: a full bottle of Seagram's and a half-empty fifth of DuBouchett's Blackberry Brandy, for when Sarah's father came by to see how his little girl was doing on her own.

"I'm . . . not sure why you told me these things, Denny," Sarah repeated. "But, don't blame yourself. Believe me."

"You're right." Cassady's voice was like a metronome. "Life's too short."

He covered his eyes with his hands again. Without stopping, he told Sarah about the October night on the El platform, about being a spectator to death. In his head he was singing

(making love in a rock bed)

Sarah spilled much of the bottle's contents on the counter.

(beneath the subway tracks with you)

Cassady slowly took his hands from his face. Without stopping, he let



the knife drop into Sarah Dunleavy's back. Much of her blood spilled onto the counter.

(my brown-eyed girl)

The next several hours were a nightmarish blur. Conspiracy blended with paranoia, enveloping Cassady the moment he left Sarah's apartment. His face was no longer familiar; he was wearing the same type of mask that all the other faces were wearing. Every day of their stinking lives. The cops wouldn't even question his motive; they would nod their heads in agreement and maybe even buy him a beer after he told them the reason he killed the love of his life SarahSarahSarahhhhh

He grabbed a too-inquisitive squirrel and squeezed its steaming guts onto the dying grass as if the rodent was toothpaste. Squirrel-honey, your gums are bleeding because of gingivitus, you dumbshit. Better use Colgate. Ha! He named the squirrel Binky. R.I.P., Binky old buddy. Hasti Spumanti.

It was a Bad Day at Black Rock, all right. First Sarah and her incessant whining over his looks and that stupid laugh that sounded like a freaking air hose! And the rain was making the deadspace in his right bicep throb as if the muscle was still there. Fucking doctors, eight years ago said it'd be all right. Yea, all the interns at the Osteopathic Hospital were aware of his case, nodding their heads in agreement, saying the muscle would be back in the next six months. Liars! Didn't they realize muscles are what girls wanted? They were too busy making their six-figure incomes anyway . . .

Cassady bought a pint of Seagram's, downed it while crossing a public park, and threw the empty bottle with all his might. He clapped in glee when the bottle smashed against the wall of a recreation center, shattering the gang graffiti and lovers' initials.

He ran screaming down a deserted midnight street. No one looked out their windows, and, knowing this, Cassady smiled broadly and winked at the clouds above.

He shred secrets with the drainage ditches.

Somehow finding his way uptown to Sheridan, Cassady raced madly for the El tracks intersecting the street at Loyola. He fell down, chipping a front tooth. Swinging a ragged fist, he mouthed bloody epithets at several singing winos behind the ruins of the Grenada theater.

He had to get to the train. Pull a train. The train of thought. He had lost his train of thought. Hey, where did we go, days when the rain came? All along the waterfall with you, my brown-eyed girl. On Slate Street that grate street I saw a man he dry humped his wife a Chicano made moan

sound Ha! I saw a man he danced with a knife in Chicago oh please come to Boston in the springtime . . . the train! It was coming he could make it

(underneath the subway tracks with you)

(my brown-eyed girl)

the train. A giant, throbbing penis that screwed Cassady every time he took its sterile ride for a job interview. Or for a pick up.

The turnstile of the Loyola station wavered in front of him, a gateway to truth, an upright skeleton of a dead centipede. Glazed with ice, it blazed like neon blue in Cassady's brain.

He found the needed energy to run toward it, making the distance easily in seven long strides. But the bars moved clockwise, providing an exit for the commuters inside. It was not intended to be an entrance. The bars did not budge and Cassady was beyond hearing his nose crack. His lips curled in a snarl and his teeth touched the frozen metal.

He stepped back, lunging forward three more times, each time harder than the previous, stopping only when a triangular swatch of his cheek was ripped from his face. A bone shard, fingernail-thin and red in the night, peeked through Cassady's right eyelid like a sentry. Scouting a new way to get into the fortress.

He left the turnstile, then. Stumbling toward the closed glass doors. Flecks of his face trailed behind.

The door was locked. He did not hesitate, and by crashing through it, gouged his already blinded eye. When he hit the ground, something broke deep inside him, making a pulpy sound, perhaps that of crushing grapes for wine.

His legs made mock parodies of each other as he fell forward along the concrete floor. Muttering incoherent thank-yous that it was too late for a teller to be on duty, Cassady crawled up the iced stairs, ten, twenty, thirty leading upward into a mist. Darkness clutched at his one remaining eyelid.

When he heard the quiet rumble of the approaching train, not realizing that the Loyola terminal was closed for repairs, he finally relaxed.

He cried as the train went by, a thunderous blur of winos and late-night partyers, none so much as noticing his outstretched, supplicating arms.

He cried louder, in great sobs spewed from his throat like vomit. Then he saw the man, so much like him, dragging his body away from Cassady as if Cassady himself was some kind of psycho pariah. Or was that messiah?

The similar man undid the buttons on his shirt in painful slowness. Would anybody care if Cassady did kill himself, like he knew the other

man was going to do? He was sure his parents didn't even know he was living in Chicago. The last time he had written them, years before, he had told them he was working for the government. Would his face be in the paper? Pull a train, pull the cord tighter tighter honey honey sugar sugar yummy yummy. My brown-eyed girl.

Tying the knot was easier than he had expected, even with the skin peeling off his fingers in the pre-dawn cold.

The other man, now nothing more than a shadow, climbed on top of the salt box next to the stairwell. He waited for Cassady to decide. So, it was going to be a game of chicken! Cassady would show them all!

The other man, now just a mist, painstakingly tied one shirt sleeve around his tired neck.

And on a blustery night in early November, long after the Night Owl train was lost in the distance of the skyline, Dennis Cassady watched with numb fascination as a crazy man hung himself with the remains of his blood splattered shirt. He was afraid to make a move.

Of course, there were no living witnesses.

## The Foggy, Foggy Dew

Joel Lane

*Joel Lane is one of the youngest writers to appear in The Year's Best Horror Stories, and it's nice to see that there's no danger the breed is dying out. Lane was born in Exeter in 1963, grew up in Birmingham, and is presently at Cambridge, where he obtained a B.A. in History and Philosophy of Science and has now started research in the same subject. He has published poetry in Argo, Oxford Poetry, and elsewhere, and his stories have appeared in Dark Horizons and Dark Dreams. He has also written a critical essay on Ramsey Campbell for Foundation.*

*"The Foggy, Foggy Dew" was published as a small press booklet (accompanied by a short poem) and suggests that Joel Lane will shortly be as popular with the Birmingham tourist industry as Ramsey Campbell must be with Liverpool's—assuming such exists.*

THE GRAY VAN which stopped in front of the office carried no legend to correspond to the words O'BRIEN INDUSTRIAL SERVICES printed in gray on the locked office door. As the eight people who had been waiting on the pavement gathered by the van, a short man in a cheap blue suit emerged from its front. He ticked their names on a list. "Right, can you get in the back?" They climbed awkwardly onto the wooden benches that flanked the body of the van, on opposite sides of a heap of canvas-covered boxes. The benches were dusty; someone coughed. The drizzle made a subdued insect-sound on the low roof. The van shuddered into activity; its interior was paler than the exterior, a discolored white, and enough light connected the windscreen with the blurred pane in the back door for the passengers to see one another. Outside, the rain filled in the remaining pale spaces on the pavement.

The young man seated opposite Daniel shrugged his raincoat up above his head and pulled it forward, reversing the sleeves, until he was free of its shadow. The gloom diminished his face, sharpening its familiarity. But even when, a few minutes later, the other offered Daniel a cigarette and he saw the long, tapering fingers, he could not convince himself of

the recognition. Too much of the past was at stake for him not to hesitate. But as the journey continued, Daniel suspected that the other was watching him in a similar manner. Ahead, the windscreen blinked repeatedly at the gauze of rain.

The van stopped in a car park somewhere to the north of Birmingham. It released them halfway up a slope; uphill a line of factory buildings were being repaired or demolished, and in the creases of the valley a slick road twisted like a ribbon of metal. There were no houses in sight; a new industrial estate was taking shape on the ground of an older one. Large open patches displayed only flattened mounds of brick and steel, flecked with clumps of purple-flowering weed; only rain and the eye lent them perpendicular structures. Where the road dissolved in mist, three black chimneys were stubbed out against the sky. One was broken in half, presenting a scalpel's profile. Inside the factory it was dry, which made the air seem colder. A corridor opened onto rooms housing nothing but unfinished monsters of scaffolding. Radios competed with machinery. The vast concrete-floored warehouse in which the eight workers found themselves was contrastingly still and quiet. Tiers of metal shelves, beginning some eight feet off the ground, formed dust-skinned ranks that were confusingly repetitive of the half-light. Daniel remembered how the public library had seemed to him as a child; being empty made these shelves even harder to distinguish.

Throughout the morning they swept the dust on the floor into ridges like Braille, then into mounds. It was so light and dry that the brooms raised little gray clouds whose outlines settled on the concrete. Apart from an occasional cough or sneeze, the only sound was the insectile rustle of the brooms. When they swept fine wet sand back over the same ground, the concrete began to reflect a thin light. The mounds were shoveled into wheelbarrows. The faint antiseptic smell of the cleaning sand drifted ambiguously over the original metallic odor. Someone in a white overall pushed a trolley along the dim aisle.

Daniel held a huge plastic mug of oversweetened tea between his grimy hands. He scrutinized the vague figure seated beside him by the wall. Had he seen it hunched over a desk? The figure shook with a violent sneeze; spilled tea played a bar on the floor. The man turned around. "Have you got a light?" he asked, then stared. "Hello, Danny."

"Peter—I thought I recognized you." Suddenly he could recall clearly the image that had suggested itself: the boy of fourteen, face calm, eyes unreachable as he leaned over the piano keys. Six years ago Peter's father had died, and Peter and his mother had moved away to another district; they had lost touch after that. "What a coincidence. How are you?"

Peter's reply disintegrated into a violent fit of sneezing. He put his hand to his face; it came away discolored with blood. "Oh, Jesus." He fumbled into his pockets. "Have you got a handkerchief? Thanks." He leaned back, pressing Daniel's handkerchief into his face. "Sorry about this . . . just this . . . dust," he said nasally.

That afternoon Daniel and Peter used a mobile scaffolding frame to clean the lower tier of shelves in each row, taking it in turns to push the frame along. From time to time they whipped the bars with their dusters, creating sudden negative-image flowers in the air. As each gray keyboard of metal followed the last, Daniel felt more distant from his own mechanical actions. He could not imagine stopping, though his hands flinched from contact with the uncomfortable metal surfaces. Hours later the two climbed down, wearing makeup of dust-bound sweat. They washed in a mobile toilet on the building site; as Daniel turned to the door, Peter was still scrubbing at his hands and staring angrily into a freckled mirror. "Need hot water, for God's sake," he muttered. When he returned to the warehouse several minutes later, his face and hands were marked with red scratches. The anonymous van, which returned to the car park at four o'clock, seemed exactly the same color as the shelves. Vacillating between sleep and waking, Daniel hung the pale faces opposite him in a series of steel frames. Outside, nightfall was beginning to paint in the gaps between buildings.

"I think we might do it this time. There'd be enough dust in the atmosphere to shut out the sunlight for weeks; the world would just freeze over." The Anvil's gloomy interior suddenly framed a snapshot of trees shattering like icicles onto a dead soil, weighted down by tides of mist. "Be useless to stay underground. There won't be a blade of grass left on the surface. Won't even be air to breathe." Daniel stared at the taut face across the table. His glass was chilly in his hands, dulled over with vapor. He shut his eyes, and the picture intensified: snow crusted like mold over an endless plain, littered with bodies that glowed faintly in the dark. Abstract faces crumbled; they consisted of gray ashes, like papier-mâché masks. The men sitting by the wall had similar faces, patient and knowing. They looked up from their pints of Guinness as Peter continued: "They say people fear the unknown, but if something is feared it becomes unknown. It's like a shadow, it destroys the ability to see what causes it. Eventually it pervades and disconnects everything. By the time the end comes you can't tell it apart from the past. Imagine, though, casting a horoscope and finding that *absolutely nothing* is going to happen."

Daniel felt a gap widening between the words and their meaning. Was he drunk? Perhaps he could not hear all of what Peter was saying. The song on the jukebox seemed to go on forever without changing, dropping phrases like litter onto a neutral background: *Tell me how does it feel, when your heart grows cold?* "What about survival?" he tried. "You used to say man would survive if he wanted to."

"Well, perhaps. I don't know what survives. Is it humanity that wants to survive, or is it just flesh that doesn't want to turn into dirt?" He finished his pint. "Christ, look at the time. My mother'll be worried."

Daniel stood up; confusion filled his head like catarrh. Only outside, where it was already dark, could he see clearly. The clocks had been set back a few days ago. "Come along, she'll be glad to see you." The Anvil's door divided the jukebox and a barrage of noise. "They're widening the road," Peter explained. Wires that drooped plastic flags guided them through a maze of trenches and pits. A series of terraced houses were in the process of being demolished; the glimpses of pale wallpaper, strips of green vinyl over splintered boards, a red metal staircase, were inexplicably embarrassing. Another house supported a growth of scaffolding, some of whose squares were filled in by tarpaulins. The next street was a row of little shops, mostly boarded up. The boards were patched with several layers of posters, some advertising events months past. Corrugated iron distorted a gigantic face. In one of the side-streets, so narrow that cars could not pass by one another, two old women in housecoats stood talking, bent nearly horizontal. They did not move as the two men passed between them. In a gap between the houses a narrow canal gleamed through spiked railings. At the next house Peter stepped over a low wall, crossed a paved front yard and knocked loudly at the door; then he unlocked it and led Daniel inside. A wardrobe occupied the space between the inner door and the naked stairs, to the right of which a narrow hallway was painted orange by the lampshade. A chilly Picasso family—man, woman, and child—stared toward the floor. From the front room there came a repeated sound of high-pitched clicking. "Hello," Peter called. The sound halted.

Mrs. Telford had aged considerably since Daniel had last met her. Loss of weight had sharpened the birdlike quality of her angular face, while her hair was thinner and paler as though it had died. Between her chair and the door, occupying half of the small room, was a black wooden handloom. Her hands, which, like her son's, were long-fingered and slender, perched on the shuttles. Squares of completed cloth, their pattern lost in the dimness, hung from several of the wires. After the brief interruption, her hands slipped back into the involuntary routine of

movement. The clicking of the shuttles synchronized with her words: "So you're Danny Carr, I remember you." As they talked, Peter shifted uneasily at the door. "Peter told me about meeting you at this job, a strange coincidence, don't you agree?" She sniffed. "Have you two been drinking?"

"Only a little," said Peter. He moved clumsily around the room; the contrast with his mother's appearance made him seem heavier than before. Daniel watched the alternating shuttles, nearly hypnotized.

"You know how it is," Mrs. Telford said to Daniel, "when they grow up you've got no authority any more. He doesn't listen, doesn't even hear me. And when he's been so ill—" Her eyes focused on a point somewhere in front of Daniel's face; he remembered that she was shortsighted.

"Just some kind of allergy," Peter muttered to no one in particular. The abstraction that had been noticeable in the pub was taking possession of him. He drew away from his phantom image in the window and occupied himself with coughing quietly. "Must have been the dust in the factory. It was only the first day."

"Well, why not spend all of your money on poisoning yourself?" Her hands increased in pace; she glanced at Daniel as if to say *can't you see the joke?* The patches of finished cloth shifted in position, like draughts on a board. "Can you stay for dinner?"

"No, thank you. I've got to get home soon." He was glad that this was true: eating in strange company made him feel stupidly clumsy. But Peter had behaved as though he wanted to discuss something. He felt guilty about leaving now, while his friend was off balance.

"Why don't you show Danny your music room?" Mrs. Telford said. Peter stepped forward, his face still in shadow. He reached out a hand as though to touch her bent shoulder, to make a link, but drew it back. "You'll excuse me for not coming with you," she continued to Daniel, "I don't walk around much these days. My arthritis is getting worse." For the first time, he noticed a pair of dull aluminum crutches leaning against the far wall, next to Peter.

The music room was upstairs, between the two bedrooms. It had clearly once been a child's bedroom, perhaps Peter's; the wallpaper, tacky with mingled dust and moisture, was the same sickly pink as the cotton curtains. Two gray metal bookcases stood to left and right, one erratically packed with books, the other bearing heaps of music scripts, some in box files, most in loose bundles. "Most of the music was my father's," Peter said. In the middle of the room stood the large piano that Daniel remembered from the front room of the Telford's former house. Behind it, a dull brass Christ was dying on the wall, small as a pinned insect.



“You still play the piano?” he said. Memories jabbed him: Peter in music lessons at school, in the junior-school assembly hall, at home in the evening. The wooden mouth jerked open to reveal the pattern which he had been reminded of several times lately, though he couldn’t recall what by. Peter sat down on the stool and bent his head low over the keyboard, as though trying to read it. From downstairs Daniel could hear the insistent click of the loom; and from along the street, he heard the crunch and scrape of demolition.

Peter had been playing for what must have been half an hour when the lights went out; Daniel had listened in a kind of confused trance that was more submission than attention. The player seemed to draw life out of the keys into his fingers, while his body and head remained fixed as a fetal statue. One of the keys struck dully—the wire was slack—and he drew in breath abruptly whenever he touched it, or when he played an occasional wrong note. Every few minutes he either switched to another tune or waited for Daniel to suggest one. When the house suddenly went dark, he carried on playing; perhaps his eyes were closed. Daniel remembered that the local papers had carried warnings about the likely effect of coal shortages on Midland power stations. He wondered whether there were any candles in the house. In the dark the piano, a cold and painful voice, limped on regardless; so, he realized suddenly, did the even click of the handloom downstairs. There was a quality both reassuring and slightly threatening in these sounds that kept him, silent, in his chair and listening. Gradually his friend’s profile defined itself out of the gray.

He could see the piano and its hunched player with detailed clarity, though the rest of the room was blurred; and no light came from the window. He could even distinguish the black from the white keys, and follow Peter’s fingers on them. The tune was familiar, though he couldn’t put a name to it. There must be a draught from somewhere, turning the room cold; the walls were invisible, and he could imagine himself to be in a vast open tunnel. The figure in front of him was smaller and more sharply featured than before. There was less of a curve to the mouth, and the eyes were wider open. The thought let a few words loose from the tune: *and the every, every time that I look into his eyes, he reminds me of the fair young maid . . .* But he didn’t want to look into the eyes, for this was the face that Peter had worn perhaps seven years ago. He hoped that the illusion would dissolve before this image could turn toward him a face of terrible perfection. If only Peter would cough, falter or play a false note, it would set him free. But the notes plucked at him, drawing his eyes to the piano, where he could now see the strings and the hammers

forming the skeleton of a chessboard, one square vibrating at a time. Dust surged back and forth on the squares, almost making figures—the draught was coming from the piano, he realized. That was why its teeth were chattering. He suspected that if he looked downward, he would be able to see the loom, the hands riding the shuttles, even the pattern on the finished squares. He did not look downward, but tensed in his chair, captured by vertigo.

A mass of figures hovered, inside or beyond the piano. They were houses in a street plan. As Peter used the loudness pedal in two harsh chords, the houses disintegrated. Some burned like newspaper, some were simply flattened. Others remained in place as charred shells, standing without roofs or windows. They could all have been card houses in the wind. Human figures struggled in them like insects being tortured by children, until they had no limbs left to struggle with. Even when the jagged ruins were softened by drifting gray snow, a few people wandered over the mounds, perhaps wondering where their homes were. One made a cross of sticks and left it stuck at an angle in the snow—was it snow or ashes? Whatever it was, it blew into people's faces and shriveled them. Kings and knights turned to pawns and were captured. The curled bodies glowed faintly, like their own ghosts, until the gray covered them entirely. The piano's cold notes fell into the vacuum, while the loom continued to mark the time, a perpetual metronome. Daniel squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his hands over his ears. He would not let this instrument draw the life out of him on its wires—but he could feel the response growing in him like unexpelled breath; tears formed behind his eyelids. The despairing reached out for him with arms that stretched harder even as the flesh dripped from them. Their faces were lost, but photographs of his family were stuck over the skulls. Before he could find his own among the faces, Daniel stood up and fumbled for the wall. Almost blind, he made his way by touch to the door. He searched for words. "Good-bye," said Peter, setting him free.

"Good-bye." The movements that took him downstairs and outside felt arbitrary. The streets were lightly smeared with mist; he felt warmer in the open air. There was a space in his thoughts where the edges itched like healing tissue; what continually seemed worst to him was how the feeling from within himself had suddenly closed off. It had been too easy to walk away, there should have been more sense of decision. On the horizon, street lamps were reduced to slanted eyes. The road-menders had packed up for the night; their trenches by the pavement appeared bottomless. It was some time before he happened to find the bus stop. Every vehicle that passed was transformed into anonymous gray. As

Daniel finally stepped onto the bus it occurred to him that he had forgotten to say good-bye to Mrs. Telford. He would apologize when he saw Peter at work on Monday.

There was no work until the following Thursday, however, and the group that Daniel found himself in was mostly different from that of the first week. Peter was not among them. "I've no idea," the foreman said when Daniel asked, "probably he found another job." Another van almost indistinguishable from the first ferried them to a series of small factories where they packed boxes with sawdust, polished machinery until it shone like bone. Daniel eventually became fascinated by the pattern that the company's activity was forming in the city. He was reminded of a novel that he had once read which suggested a hidden meaning in the architecture of San Francisco; the idea had so many applications that at times only a growing insecurity could pull him out of speculation. In a similar way, he began to find that he could listen to the radio for hours while he tried to link the underlying threads in the music. He played his records until he could hold every note and space in his mind, where he replayed them at different speeds. The language of musical notation was surely not adequate. It might conceal another language, he realized, that contained messages. Perhaps a way in which ghosts could communicate. A dead language. Daniel knew that these patterns were illusory, but it didn't matter. At least they responded to minds, which no object could. Weeks went past while he placed abstractions between himself and Peter; and nothing changed, except that the day shrank like a window between the curtains of night, and the patterns of leaves on the sky and the pavement became simpler.

One night he dreamed an idea and lay awake, thinking it out, while the moon appeared and vanished. If he cast a grid over a map of the city and used it as a chessboard (playing against himself, as he was used to doing), the movements of the winning pieces would tell him where the company's influence was directed. The losing king's position would tell him where Peter's house was; he had forgotten the address, and their name was not in the phone book. He was shivering in a dressing-gown, searching through his shelves for a nonexistent town plan, when the pattern allowed him to admit that he could find Peter's house quite easily by memory. He hurried back to bed and pressed his eyes into the pillow before they could project the previous night's dream. He had been lying in the middle of a small bedroom, with pink curtains and a dull crucifix on the wall. A man had stepped toward him in the half-light; his face was invisible, but his outstretched hands were dark with soot. Just before

touching him the hands had drawn back to peel off thin gray gloves, which he had hung up like paper bags on the crucifix. But when they had fluttered back to him the hands were still gray.

When he got off the bus the fixed, cloudless brightness of the November day made the facades of houses resemble postcards. Gaps made by demolition punctuated the series. Daniel tried to ignore the sequence of missing buildings; the pattern might lead him astray. If this was the right way, they must have filled in some of the trenches and dug new ones. He was becoming certain that he had lost his way when a Watneys pub held up the black weight of its name on a sign: The Anvil. On a bench outside, two men sat asleep, cocooned in layers of frayed clothing. He could recognize some of the posters on the boards—somebody had scratched out the middle of the word WORKERS to expose a pop star's face—but the dissected house whose red staircase he had seen was now a patch of rubble-strewn ground where weeds were already growing. On the off-white side wall of the next house, graffiti were interlaced so densely at the eye level that one could read anything into the scribbling. Surely this was the road, where a young boy in cut-off jeans was running across to bowl a tennis ball into the passageway between two houses. Dodging the airborne stroke that followed, he walked down and examined each house for signs of familiarity. Unexpectedly, he found himself looking through a line of railings; below, a drowned-looking black barge was adrift on the canal, its curtains drawn. Neither the boat nor the litter of leaves and twigs on the surface appeared to be moving. It was the next house, he remembered; but it had a ragged privet hedge instead of a wall, enclosing rose bushes stripped down to thorns. He must be in the wrong street, he realized, but recognized the house opposite as he turned. One of its upper windows wore a board like an eye patch; the result of vandals, he supposed.

There was no answer to his knock, but the flaking door creaked open at the pressure. The inner door was ajar; he pushed through it. "Hello? Mrs. Telford?" Then he coughed at the sharp dust which the draught loosed from the carpet. Damp painted a forest in the hall. Dust filled in the angles of the stairs. Obviously this house, whatever it was, had not been lived in for years.

From the unlit front room there came a regular clicking sound.

"Hello? Come in." It was her voice. The carpet felt puffy underfoot. In the front room he could hear water dripping onto the ceiling. The window where Peter had flinched from his reflection had been smashed also, but not boarded. The draught took the door from his hand and slammed it. "Oh, Danny. It's you." Mrs. Telford's bright eyes did not focus

at all. She was running the shuttles back and forth on the loom as efficiently as ever, though the wood seemed darker and warped out of true. There were no threads attached to the shuttles.

"Is Peter here?" Daniel said, and sneezed painfully.

"I've finished the cloth, look!" She pointed to a thick roll on the tea-table. Daniel repeated his question.

"He's upstairs. In the music room." Daniel made his way cautiously up the uneven stairs, holding on to the banister until it suddenly lurched away from the wall. The door to the music room was open. He looked in at the figure hunched over the piano. Peter's hands ran over the keys, but no sound came. Daniel shivered; was he deaf? Sweat tickled his back like a cold wire. There was a strong antiseptic smell in the room. He sneezed again, and heard it.

"Peter. It's Danny, what are you doing?" The silent performance continued. Daniel crossed the floor toward the helpless Christ, then turned to the piano. Peter's eyes were closed; he did not appear to be breathing. Tiny clouds of dust appeared from between the keys as he played. Now that he was close, Daniel could make out an almost entirely muffled thud from within the piano at each note. He realized that it was choked up with dust. In the middle of a tune, Peter stopped and opened his eyes.

"Peter. What's wrong?" The player looked at his hands. They were scrubbed pink and recently scarred with scratches. Dust was beginning to smear the fingertips. Some black material was lodged under the nails. Slowly, he began to rub his hands, like a Lady Macbeth in a silent film, and then to rip at the skin with his nails. Blood ran down onto the piano keys. Daniel's face flushed, but he could not cry, he was not capable of it. When his hands were red-gloved, Peter reached down under the stool and lifted a large bottle and a wad of cotton-wool. He dabbed antiseptic solution from the bottle onto his hands, wiped away the diluted stain, and swabbed the skin clean with fresh solution. His expression had still not changed (indeed, he wore no expression at all) as he put away the bottle and the cotton-wool and, closing his eyes, commenced to play what looked like the same tune as before.

Descending the stairs less carefully than he had climbed them, Daniel stood for a while in the hall, then went back into the front room. Mrs. Telford looked up at him and smiled. Her hands still shifted the vacant shuttles. "Look at the tapestry, go on. It's finished." He picked up the bundle of cloth and unrolled it. The material was soft and light, pleasant to the touch. He held it up to the light: the pattern was composed of innumerable tiny black and white squares. "Stand back from it," she said.

"Then you'll see what it is." Daniel spread it on the floor and looked down. He stared for some time. Then he looked straight up at Mrs. Telford.

"I can't see anything in it." He rolled up the cloth tightly and set it back on the table.

"Then you'll be all right," she said. "It can't hurt you." She watched the nonexistent threads on her loom. Her hands slid back and forth, regular as a pendulum. A few minutes later, she said: "That's all, you've nothing to do here. Good-bye."

Daniel was outside and anesthetized by the cold, sharp winter air before he realized that, for the second time, he had forgotten to say good-bye to Mrs. Telford. He continued to walk toward the bus stop, still wondering quite what had changed in him. But it was too difficult to know. He found himself wishing it would rain, though the sound would be entirely drowned out by the rush hour traffic.



# The Godmother

Tina Rath

*When I first read "The Godmother" by Tina Rath in Ghosts & Scholars 8, the mordant elegance of the prose made me suspect that Tanith Lee might be playing a game of pseudonyms. A query to editor Rosemary Pardoe ended my hopes for a detective career: Tina Rath is indeed Tina Rath. Further, she has had stories published in the respected anthology series, The Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories and The Fontana Book of Horror Stories, as well as in such magazines as Amazing, The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Women's Realm and Catholic Fireside.*

*Of herself, Rath says: "I was born in 1943, in Surrey, because of the bombing, but I am a Londoner. I have a B.A. from London University, an M.A. from North London Polytechnic (my dissertation was on the Theatrical Vampire) and I am currently working on my Ph.D. in vampire fiction." Wonder about the job market on that.*

"SHE'S BEEN LIKE this all morning, doctor."

Old Mrs. Rothiemay heard her granddaughter's voice, querulous as usual, but now with an undertone of some more positive emotion. Anxiety? Or could it be hope?

"Is she really bad?"

Then the doctor's rumblings, harder to make out, because she was less used to his voice, but clearly offering reassurance, suggesting perhaps that there was a lot of it about. Mrs. Rothiemay, a gripper all her life, gripped the sheets, and wished the voices away. She was such a very old woman now that she could only manage one thing at a time. Now she did not want to listen, but to think, to remember. Gratefully she let herself sink away from the voices, back through the years . . . A last, shrill exclamation from her granddaughter held her back, but only for a moment:

"She's been like this ever since Den brought her the paper up."



Mrs. Rothiemay had started life in the last century as Susannah Deborah Jewkes, named for her aunt Deborah and her godmother, Susannah Paget. Mrs. Paget had proved the better investment. When her namesake was twelve years old she found her a place at Satterthwaite, the big house where she reigned as housekeeper. Aunt Deb had been good for nothing but a plain cross and chain of doubtful metal. The young Susannah, or Sukey as she was called, had even then a well developed sense for personal property. She wore the cross permanently round her neck, where it left a greenish mark, to keep it away from her sisters. But she was well aware that Mrs. Paget was a more glittering prize. In the weeks before she went away she drove her family nearly mad with her accounts of the splendors of Satterthwaite and the glorious life she would lead there.

It was useless for her mother to point out that she was going as scullery maid, and not as an adopted daughter, and that scullery maids do not, as a rule, wear black silk dresses and eat roast chicken every day. Mrs. Paget might indeed wear silk, but she was the housekeeper. And she would only wear it on Sundays and holidays. And, as for chicken, words failed her! Nevertheless Sukey went on with her tales. It was unfortunate perhaps that Mrs. Paget arrived to take her to Satterthwaite wearing a silk dress so rich that it could have stood without the support of its wearer's ample figure, with silk petticoats audible beneath it, and *silk* stockings! The stockings alone were enough to give a normal child delusions of grandeur, besides giving a prudent mother pause for thought.

Mrs. Jewkes studied her old friend carefully as they sat sipping tea and talking over old times, and wondered about those stockings. They certainly were silk. She could hear the rasp as Mrs. Paget crossed her ankles. And was that ring on Mrs. Paget's large white hand a diamond? Was it possible that such things could be come by honestly, and if not was she right to let Sukey go? But after all, Sue had always been a saving woman, and who else had she to spend the money on but herself? Besides both stockings and rings could have been presents. Upper servants were often given such things by grateful employers . . . she did not want to stand in Sukey's way . . . and she wanted the child out of the house. She was undisciplined, lazy, and as inquisitive as a monkey.

So Mrs. Jewkes contented herself with fervently kissing her daughter, reminding her of her prayers and her duty and bidding her write a line now and again, to say how she did.

"You don't want to fret about her," said Mrs. Paget, comfortably. "Satterthwaite's not China, nor yet Tartary."

And Mrs. Jewkes dabbed her eyes with her apron, obscurely comforted by these self-evident truths.

She might have felt some disquiet had she seen her daughter's reception at Satterthwaite. Do even housekeepers, she might have asked, go to the front door? And are they let in quite so respectfully by a man-servant?

"Ah, Thomas," said Mrs. Paget to the great fine gentleman who opened the door to Sukey and herself, a gentleman so fine that Sukey took him for the master, until her godmother spoke, "you can tell the master that I've brought the little girl. I'll take her to my room and give her some dinner for we're both tired after the journey, but when we've had a bite and sup I'll bring her to see him."

And up the great stairs they went to a room that Sukey thought grand enough for the Queen herself, that Mrs. Paget called her sitting-room, and there they sat and had dinner brought to them. They really did eat roast chicken, with bread sauce and vegetables all complete and after that a sort of creamy pudding. Her godmother drank wine with the meal, but Sukey, somewhat to her disappointment, drank milk. The grandeur of her surroundings and her mother's warnings about good behavior kept her silent, and her godmother seemed pleased with her. After their dinner Sukey, under instructions, washed her face and tidied her hair and then went pattering after her godmother's dark bulk like a pet lamb through the long, ill-lit corridors of Satterthwaite, to meet her new employer.

It was here that she had her first shock. A little before they reached his room Mrs. Paget bent down and murmured that she was not to be afraid, but the master was not quite well and had to sit mainly in the dark for the light hurt his eyes. Sukey was to curtsy as she had been taught, and say yes sir and no sir, and not ask questions. It had not crossed her mind to question the master, but she would dearly have liked to question Mrs. Paget. She was given no time, but hurried into the dark room, dark not only with the night, but muffled from floor to ceiling with great long velvet curtains and lit only by a little fire. There was a sickly sweet smell as if someone had been burning pastilles, and underneath that something rather unpleasant that caught at the throat and made Sukey think, for no reason that she could imagine, of Farmer Tyson's beast yard.

Mrs. Paget stopped just inside the door and pushed Sukey forward.

"I've brought the little girl," she said.

A thin, petulant voice from the gloom said: "Well, bring her in, bring her in. Don't stand in the doorway like that!"

Mrs. Paget seemed inclined to send Sukey in alone, but she clung to

her skirt and in the end she guided the child across the dark room until they came very close to the wing chair by the fire where the master sat. Sukey curtsayed, then as no one said anything she dared to raise her eyes and look at him. She was almost shocked into an exclamation of surprise. She had been expecting a sick old man huddled up in rugs, wrinkled like grandfather Jewkes. Instead he was young and almost angelically beautiful. True he was pale, and his brilliant golden head hung back in the chair as if he were too tired to hold it upright, but even his pallor was beautiful, like marble. Sukey, forgetting her manners, stared and stared.

At last he spoke, still in that thin, weak voice: "So. This is Sukey."

"Yes sir, if you please sir," said Sukey, bobbing another curtsy to be on the safe side.

The effort of speaking those few words seemed to have exhausted him and there was another long pause.

And then he said a rather strange thing:

"And you named her?"

"I named her," said Mrs. Paget in a queer, solemn way, like someone making a response in church.

The master's great blue eyes closed. Sukey half thought he was dead, but Mrs. Paget shook her gently and whispered: "He's gone to sleep. Quietly now!"

And they both tiptoed away. The dim corridor seemed quite bright after that dark room and Sukey blinked. She opened her mouth to ask the dozen questions that were buzzing in her head, beginning with "What's *wrong* with him then?" and going on to "What did he mean, asking if you named me?", but Mrs. Paget hurried her along so fast that she got no time to ask anything at all.

She took her back to her own rooms. Her bedroom led off the sitting-room, and off that again was a little room which she called a powder room—giving Sukey some uneasiness as she took it to mean the place where the gunpowder was kept—where a truckle bed had been set up. Still giving Sukey no time to talk she told her to get herself undressed and into bed as soon as she liked, for she must be tired. Once she was in bed Mrs. Paget came in, both to take away the candle for fear of fire, and to give her a cup of milk, with honey, to help her sleep. Warm milk and honey must have had a wonderfully soothing power for, in spite of the strangeness of the bed and all those unanswered questions, she fell asleep at once.

The next day came remarkably close to Sukey's dreams of life at Satterthwaite. After a breakfast of bread and milk taken in her godmother's room, Mrs. Paget told her that, although by rights she

should now go to the kitchen to start her new duties, “the whole house is quite at sixes and sevens what with the master being so bad, and Mrs. Colleywood, Cook that is, can’t be doing with you down there for a while. So if you’ll sit quiet up here and let me see what sort of a hand you are with the needle, like a good girl, maybe you could take a walk in the garden this afternoon. We’ll see.”

“Is the master going to die?” Sukey inquired cheerfully.

Mrs. Paget took a quick shocked breath. “Why no, bless you, he gets these bad turns regular. He’ll be right as ninepence in a day or two.”

Sukey tried to see that strange, sick figure “right as ninepence” and failed. Nevertheless she held her tongue and took her godmother’s needlework bag when it was offered, with another bag stuffed with scraps of cloth and bits of ribbon, and settled to work. She was very handy with her needle when she cared to be and she set herself the task of making a little tablecloth in patchwork, each patch edged with ribbon. Working with such pretty stuffs, at her own pace, gazing out of the window when she cared to or taking a turn round the room to admire her godmother’s handsome china ornaments, hardly seemed like work to Sukey and she was able to pass the morning very agreeably, though about eleven it came on to rain and she could take no more pleasure in the window.

Mrs. Paget brought her a lunch of cold bread and meat and admired her sewing.

“Why I never saw such fine stitches! You could get to be a lady’s maid, Sukey, if you work hard and mind your manners.”

Sukey was flattered but somehow she did not feel that her godmother really had her mind on what she was saying. She broke right through Sukey’s discussion of whether a glossy green edging or a dull purple one would look best on a patch of crimson silk to say: “I’m afraid the weather’s changed, Sukey, as you can see, and you can’t walk out this afternoon. I must be about my work so you stay here like a good child. There are some magazines you can look at if you get tired of sewing.”

And she hurried off, without waiting for Sukey’s answer. Now, Sukey had been unnaturally good for one whole day and a half. She had watched her tongue and minded her manners and studied to please her godmother. But now, left to her own devices for a whole afternoon it was not surprising that her good behavior should become somewhat strained.

At first she went back to her sewing, flattered by Mrs. Paget’s praise of her stitches. But she still could not make up her mind about the edging and began to think that a rest might do her good. Following the housekeeper’s instructions she looked round for the magazines she had

been given leave to read. They were not immediately visible, so she began to hunt for them, and found at once a much more absorbing task than either reading or sewing. She began to poke and pry through every drawer and cupboard.

If this was an amusement in Mrs. Paget's sitting-room it was a positive fascination in her bedroom. Sukey was neat-fingered, and knew the penalties of discovery very well. Careful to leave no trace she sorted delicately through drawers full of scented underlinen, took her godmother's dresses from their hangers to hold them against her own skinny shoulders, and spent a long time over the jewel box, admiring the effect of the glittering stones and shiny metal against her own neck and ears. It was at the bottom of the jewel box that she found a small brass key. Now, nothing in either room, not even Mrs. Paget's desk, had been locked. Sukey, her curiosity really roused now, determined to find what lock the key fitted.

It was so small that at first she looked for a small box, coming close to disaster when she opened a tiny coffer on the dressing table that proved to be full of face-powder and nearly spilled it all over the floor. When she could not find a box she went back to the desk to search for a locked or better still, a secret drawer. Again there was no such thing. Back she went to the bedroom. All the cupboards there opened easily. She drifted to the middle of the room, uncertain, half willing to give up the search and go back to her sewing. After all, her godmother would very probably soon be back. The afternoon that had been so dark and rainy was ending in a wild golden sunset. It would soon be night . . . and then, in those last golden rays she caught sight of a glitter on the dark paneled wall. Idly she went to see what it might be.

It was, of course, a tiny keyhole. She slipped the key inside, turned it and pulled. The paneling swung open to reveal a hidden cupboard, as tall as a man, but very narrow. Hanging inside was what Sukey took to be a dressing gown of very thin red silk, trimmed with gold. There was more silk on the floor, apparently wrapped around something. And there was a picture painted on the inside of the door, a life-size figure that Sukey characterized as "mucky." Even as she stopped to investigate the silken wrappings on the floor she heard Mrs. Paget's step in the corridor.

She shut and locked the door, put the key back where she had found it, launched herself back into the sitting-room and was sitting at her sewing, with nothing but a slightly heightened color to betray her when Mrs. Paget came in.

Sukey came very close to mentioning her discovery. If she had not found the key while meddling with the jewel box she might have done

so. It never crossed her mind that Mrs. Paget knew of the hidden cupboard, and its strange contents, and certainly not about the picture. She supposed they had all belonged to a previous owner, probably one of the gentry who were well known to admire that sort of thing, and the key had simply been tidied away by Mrs. Paget. But one thing her mother had impressed on her was that meddling was wrong. It could lead to a box on the ears and bed with no supper. Best, she told herself, to keep quiet.

Her godmother seemed even more agitated than she had that morning. She praised Sukey's work again, though anyone but a fool could have seen how little she had done of it, then rustled up and down the room, like a large and agitated moth. When at last she settled it was on a chair a good distance from Sukey and though she began to talk to her she seemed curiously unwilling to look her in the face.

"You know, Sukey dear," she began, "that gentlemen, and ladies too, have all sorts of odd ways . . ." and then she hesitated for so long that Sukey thought she had finished and put a few more stitches into her patchwork. But then she started again: "Well, the master has got it into his head that he wants to sit out in the garden. Now, with his eyes being so bad he can only go out at nighttime. He'll want things fetched to him, and of course I must wait on him, it's no more than my duty, but I don't care for walking through the grounds alone at night, so I thought that perhaps you, Sukey, could go along with me. You could sleep late tomorrow, you know," she added.

"Yes, I'll walk with you and welcome," said Sukey as she had been taught. "But won't the master take cold?"

"Oh, he'll have a fire," Mrs. Paget said, briskly. Now her message had been delivered she seemed calmer, though she would eat no dinner, and went to lie down for a while when Sukey had eaten hers, promising to call her when it was time to go to the master.

Sukey went back to her sewing. The evening dragged on. It seemed to her that it was almost morning when her godmother called her, though in fact it was not quite midnight, as she saw by the little traveling clock beside the bed. Mrs. Paget was already wrapped in a black cloak. She wound Sukey in a shawl and gave her a covered basket to carry, then led her not down the main staircase but through some narrow passageways and down a steep flight of backstairs, through the empty kitchens and across the stable yard. It was not especially cold, but very dark. The rainclouds had come back and there was neither moon nor star to be seen. Sukey tried to ask a question or two, but she was immediately

hushed, and once they were in the park she found she needed all her breath to keep up.

They seemed to walk a very long way, through shrubbery, across a wide expanse of dark grass, and then downhill, until Sukey smelled stagnant water and saw the lake glimmering ahead. They walked along the lake shore for some way and then at last they glimpsed a fire in the distance. As they got closer Sukey saw that the master had not one fire but four.

They were burning in cast iron braziers, set, though Sukey did not know at the time, at the four points of the compass, in a strange white building that was mostly pillars. He was feeding one of the fires, and he looked worse than Sukey remembered. He was sweating, and he had clearly not even the strength to dress properly for outdoors, for he was wearing what she took to be a long white nightshirt that left his arms bare.

"You're late," he said, in his faded voice, "I can hardly hold him."

Mrs. Paget briskly shed her cloak and began feeding another brazier from a little basket that lay beside it. Sukey was shocked to see that she was wearing nothing but the thin silk robe from the secret cupboard.

Heavy wreaths of smoke, some sweet, some acrid billowed across their faces. The master stood up, wiping his face.

"Take the child into the circle," he said.

Mrs. Paget went white. "What!" she hissed, "I know a trick worth two of that! Take her in yourself. I've done my part."

Sukey looked round for the circle they were talking about and saw it, drawn in what looked like brownish chalk on the white marble floor. There seemed no reason why anyone should be as frightened by it as Mrs. Paget and the master so obviously were. Sukey yielded to her curiosity and stepped in of her own accord to see what all the fuss was about.

And at once she knew. The floor seemed to open in a sickening downward spiral and at the same time it could not be opening because she did not fall, although she felt all the horrible sensations of falling. Yet it must be opening for Something was coming through it. Sukey felt herself being engulfed in this Something in the most horrible way. The physical sensations might be compared to being drowned in freezing sewage, that burned like acid while it froze. The mental were indescribable, but included a sort of sickness of the mind that she was sure would have sent her mad if it had gone on a moment longer. For it stopped quite suddenly. The Thing rejected her, literally hurling her outside the circle, beyond the light of the braziers.

She landed on her face in the grass. For a moment she lay still, until the sound of her godmother's screams spurred her into action. She stood up, some instinct warning her not to look behind, and ran for the house. But however fast she ran, however often she fell, and stumbled up again and ran on, she did not lose her grip on that christening gift from her Aunt Deborah, that cross of dubious metal but undoubted power that she found herself clutching so tightly in her hand.

The scandal, when it broke next morning, was only concerned with the master who had been found beside the lake, half naked and wholly dead, and Mrs. Paget who was still just alive, but "quite silly like" and wearing what appeared to be a red silk nightdress of the most indecent sort. The discovery in the lake of a collection of bones that seemed to have belonged to quite a number of young girls was hushed up. And Sukey never talked.

She never told anyone, either, of what she found in her godmother's secret cupboard. In fact, she burned it before any one could see it, which was a pity perhaps. A contract with the devil's own signature might have interested a number of people. But Sukey felt justified. No one likes to make public that she has been sold to Satan by her own godmother, and that there appeared to be no escape clause.

The master's will was made public, and caused quite a lot of gossip. He gave instructions that he should be buried in a room built on to the family mausoleum especially for him. He was to be sitting in a chair, fully dressed, in his everyday clothes, with a bottle in his hand. The floor was to be sprinkled with certain herbs and a quantity of broken glass. The gossips said that all this was to prevent the devil collecting his body. His soul had already been lost that night by the lake when he failed to deliver whatever he had agreed to provide, every seven years, in return for long life, riches and beauty.

It was all a lot of nonsense, of course. Sukey had been sent to a less glamorous but safer place, grown up, married, and tried to forget. Over the years she had managed to persuade herself that everything had indeed been some sort of nightmare, the product of an overactive imagination . . .

But now Mrs. Rothiemay had been forced to reconsider. It had been the half forgotten name of Satterthwaite that had drawn her eye to the newspaper item with its unpromising headline: "So much for tradition." It told, reasonably accurately, what it described as the legend of how the master of Satterthwaite had been buried, and described how that little room had been opened recently by a curious historian, wishing to check the accuracy of what he called "folk memory."



Of course, he had found that the story had been all nonsense. The room was quite empty.

The devil, Mrs. Rothiemay could see, was not so easily cheated.

## "Pale Trembling Youth"

W. H. Pugmire and Jessica Amanda Salmonson

*W.H. Pugmire (a.k.a. Wilum Hogfrog Pugmire) is well known to members of Lovecraftian fandom for his many contributions to the fan press. Born in Seattle, Washington on May 3, 1951, Pugmire began seriously writing fiction in the early '70s after serving two years in Ireland as a Mormon missionary. Disgusted with his early tales, he stopped writing for seven years, at which time he became involved in the local Seattle punk underground, publishing his fanzine, Punk Lust, for five years. At the urging of Salmonson, he has recently returned to writing fiction. Pugmire says that his hobbies are "dressing up like Boy George and cruising construction sites."*

*Jessica Amanda Salmonson is another wild talent from Seattle, and a writer who has moved from the small press to the big leagues, but who still finds time for fiction and poetry for the fan publications—in fact, she edits the small press magazines, Fantasy Macabre and Fantasy & Terror. She has written a number of fantasy novels, edited fantasy series (Amazons and Heroic Visions), and has a horror novel forthcoming.*

*The following collaborative effort appeared in Dennis Etchison's Cutting Edge, a groundbreaking anthology of contemporary horror. Not all horrors are drowned in blood.*

DYKES, KIKES, spics, micks, fags, drags, gooks, spooks . . . more of us are outsiders than aren't; and *that's* what the dear young ones too often fail to see. They think they've learned it all by age fifteen. Perhaps they have. But they're not the only ones who've learned it.

They're wise youngsters, no doubt about it, and I wish them all survival, of one kind or another, though few of them will have it. They're out there on the streets at night; they've spiked their hair and dyed it; they've put roofing nails through their earlobes and scratched their lovers' initials in the whites of their eyes. And they're such beauties, these children. I have empathy for them, though by their standards, at thirty, I'm an old man. Am I a dirty old man? Perhaps. But I keep my hands to

myself and am outraged by the constant exploitation I have seen. I help who I can, when I can. They laugh at me for it; I don't mind. Much as they hate to admit it, they appreciate the helping hand; they assuredly need it.

The new bands have power. They have raw, wild, gorgeous, naive energy. The temporary nature of these bands, the transience of the sound they create, the ephemeral nature of their performances *and their youth* has a literal and symbolic truth to it that breaks my heart. Ah, the dear young ones! Their own parents hate them. Their parents hate themselves. How morosely, pathetically beautiful it all is!

But I have my criticisms. I don't tell them what to do with their lives, but I do tell them they're not the first and only ones to *know*. They all think they've invented it; invented everything. Twelve-year-old artists of the street—don't ever doubt that some of them are geniuses—their music, dress, and Xerox flyers are undeniably brilliant works of art. Stripped of technical gaudiness and the veneer of social dishonesty, these kids and their art alienate people because of the reality that's exposed.

Reality is pain.

But none of it is new. A punk who's a good friend, a good kid, I gave him a rare old dada poster for his birthday. He loved it. He thought it was something new. "No, sir," I told him. "It was printed before World War I." He was impressed. He got some white paste and smeared it onto the window of an uptown jewelry store. What brilliance! It breaks my heart.

So there's nothing new. Least of all pain. It's the oldest thing around. I want to tell them, "Yes, you're outsiders. Yes, this thing you're feeling really is pain. But you're not alone." Or you're not alone in being alone. A poison-bad planet. For everyone.

On the north side of Lake Union, visible from about any high point in and around the city, is a little spot called Gas Works Park. Considering how visible it is on the lake's edge, it's rather out of the way. It has the appearance of war's aftermath—a bombed factory. When the gasworks closed shop several decades back, no one knew what to do with that extraordinary network of chimneys and pipes and silos. For years they sat rusting. Then someone had the fat idea of painting the whole thing, laying a lawn, and calling it a park. It looks good. It looks monstrous. It is urban decadence at its best and worst. It's not much frequented at night.

A pathetic old faggot took me across on his sailboat. He's not only pathetic, but rich; spent his whole life "buying" his way to the inside. But

he's an outsider, too. We met in a downtown park in the days of my own alienated childhood, when he wasn't much younger but his gums were less black; and we've pretended we're friends ever since.

I'd been on his boat most of the late afternoon and early evening, until the sun was going down. Then I said, "I don't need to go back into town. Let me ashore at Gas Works Park."

He let me off. I stood on the concrete landing and waved to the old man, who looked almost heroic pulling at the rigging—but not quite.

The sun had set. The last streaks of orange were visible beyond the city's silhouette. The skyscrapers south of the lake were shining like boxes full of stars. I turned my back, climbed the grassy knoll, and gazed toward the antiquated gasworks. The garish paint had been rendered invisible by the darkness.

I breathed deeply of the cold, clean evening air and felt invigorated. The decayed structure before me was huge, the skeleton of a gargantuan beast. Its iron pipes, winding steel stairs and catwalks, variety of ladders, planks, chains, and tanks had a very real aesthetic charm. "Danger—keep off," a sign read on a chain-link fence. Even in the darkness, the evidence of the structure's conquerors—their graffiti—was palely visible on the surface of its heights.

Hearing footsteps in the gravel behind me, I turned and saw a tall skinhead punk shambling toward the fence. He nodded and smiled at me, then leaned toward the fence, curling fingers around the links. I thought I detected a sadness in his eyes. He was looking upward into one particular part of the gasworks, with such intensity that I could not help but follow his gaze. It seemed that he was staring at a particular steel stairway that led up and into a long pipe.

The sound of his deep sigh made me look at him again. He had taken a pack of cigarettes from a pocket in his black leather jacket. "Smoke?" he offered, holding the pack toward me.

"No, thank you," I replied. Kindness and gentility, contrasted against a violent image, no longer surprised me in these youths.

"Something else, ain't it?" he said, nodding at the structure.

"It is," I replied, not in a mood for conversation.

He continued: "My band and I used to come here at midnight to record tapes of us banging on parts of it. Fucking inspiration! You get some really cool sounds."

"You're in a punk band?" I asked lamely.

"Naw. Industrial band. Kind of an offshot of punk and hard-core, a lot of screaming and banging on pipes and weird electronic sounds. Put it all together and it makes an intense noise."

"Hmmm," I said, having trouble imagining why anyone would want to sit around banging on pipes and screaming. I must, occasionally, admit to a gap between this generation and mine.

"But we broke up," he continued in a quiet voice. "Our singer hanged himself. Up there." He turned to gaze once more at that particular section of the structure. I felt a chill. Talk of death was unpleasant to me, and this was too sudden an introduction of the subject.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Yeah, it's sad. He had a great voice. He could scream and make you feel like you'd die. Then he could sing so tenderly you couldn't hold back tears. But he was messed up. His dad was always getting drunk and beating on him, so he took to the streets. Came to live with me and some others in an abandoned building. We called him Imp, he was so small. He'd never eat, just drink coffee and do a lot of speed. He shook all the time and he had so little color to his skin that some of us took to calling him the 'pale trembling youth,' which he didn't like as much as Imp."

He paused to take a drag from his cigarette. The night had grown especially dark. The gasworks stood silently before us and seemed to listen to the young man's tale.

"He really loved this place. Used to come at night with a wrench or hammer to investigate sounds. He slept here a lot. He'd bring his girls here."

He stopped again, his face sad.

"His last girlfriend killed herself with sleeping pills. He loved her like none of the others. A few days later he was found up there, swinging from that pipe, his studded belt around his broken neck."

"How old was he?"

"Sixteen." After a pause, he tossed his cigarette to the ground and shoved his hands into pockets. "Well, it's getting cold. Think I'll head on back to the District and find me some anarchy and beer." He smiled kindly. I returned his smile. "Nice talking to you." We nodded to each other. He turned and stalked into the darkness.

It had indeed grown cold, but as I turned to look once more at the weird structure, I felt drawn near. Looking with dismay at the fence before me, I took hold of it and began to climb.

When I reached the top of the fence, I moaned softly at the difficulty climbing over and down the other side. I felt cold air against my neck. Looking at a section of the gasworks where the punk had taken his life, I thought I saw a shadowy figure watching me. Then the shadows blended and the image was gone.

Wind played with my hair. With sudden resolve, I climbed over the top of the fence, almost falling down the other side.

I stood near a huge rusted pipe. It was perhaps forty feet long and five feet high. I felt a thrill of boyish excitement, for I have had a love of tunnels since I was small. Going to one end of the pipe, I stood to look inside.

I entered.

My footfalls echoed weirdly as my boots hit the metal surface. The sides felt cold and rough. When I reached the middle, I sat down, bending knees to chest, listening to the sounds of evening. Then I heard a pinging, coming from the end of the pipe that I had entered. I looked and saw a small person standing there, looking at me. From its stance I took it to be a boy. The figure held something in its hand, which it slowly, nonchalantly struck against the pipe. Then my vision seemed to blur. I rubbed my eyes with shaky fingers; when I looked again, I saw nothing.

I sat for what seemed endless moments. Finally, I raised myself on unsteady legs.

From above came a sudden banging, a horrible and ferocious sound, as though a madman were leaping from place to place and violently striking at pipes and metal surfaces with something large. The sound of it shook the pipe I was in. I felt the reverberations like a throbbing pain in my skull. Shouting in alarm, I fell to my knees, covering my ears with moist palms. On and on it went, until I was sure that I would lose my mind.

Then it stopped. For a few moments all I could hear was the ringing in my ears. Then another sound came to me: low sobbing. I had never heard such misery and loneliness in a voice. It tore my heart to listen to it. It froze my soul. Gradually it faded into silence.

I was too weak to rise. When at last I found the strength, I crawled weakly out of the pipe, into the waiting dark.



## Red Light

David J. Schow

*A relative newcomer to the field, David J. Schow has become a favorite of readers and reviewers with his entries in The Year's Best Horror Stories. It has to be a matter of writing excellence, since each story evoked a different mood than the others—and "Red Light" is no exception.*

*The versatile David J. Schow was born on July 13, 1955, in Marburg, West Germany—a German orphan adopted by American parents. After seeing the world in his younger days, Schow seems to have settled in Los Angeles. His short fiction has appeared in Twilight Zone Magazine, Night Cry, Weird Tales, Whispers, and elsewhere, and he has been a columnist for various publications and a contributing editor to film books. His most recent opus is The Outer Limits: The Official Companion from Ace—the long-expected guide to that television series. Schow has also written some sixteen television/film tie-ins and series books, under various names. Under his own name, look out for The Kill Riff and The Shaft, both horror novels from Tor. Meanwhile Schow is busy over a pair of horror anthologies. He admits to having invented the term "splatterpunk" at a very-late-night party.*

TABLOID HEADLINES always make me laugh. You know: *I Aborted Bigfoot's Quints*, or *See Elvis' Rotting Nude Corpse*, or *Exclusive on Jack the Ripper's Grandson!* Earlier today, while passing one of those Market Street news vendors, I saw similar hyperbolic screamers, and I laughed. I did not want to laugh: it came out as a sick coughing sound.

TASHA VODE STILL MISSING  
Terrorist Kidnapping  
of International Cover Girl  
Not Ruled Out

What the hell did they know about her? Not what I knew. They were like vampires; they sucked, ethically. Morally.



But what did that make *me*?

At the top of the dungheap was the good old *National Perspirer*, the hot, steaming poop on Tasha's disappearance, and how one of three juicy fates had befallen her. One: She had pulled a Marilyn Monroe. Two: She had had a Dorothy Stratten pulled *on* her by some gonzo fruitbag lover. Three: She was tucked away in the Frances Farmer suite at some remote, tastefully isolated lunatic asylum.

Or maybe she was forking over richly to manufacture all this furious controversy in order to boost her asking price up into the troposphere—in a word, hoax time.

It was pathetic. It made my gut throb with hurt and loss, and downtown San Francisco diffused behind a hot salt-wash of welling tears. I blamed the emissions of the Cal Trans buses lumbering up and down the street, knowing full well I couldn't cop such a rationalization, because the buses ran off electricity, like the mostly-defunct streetcars. Once, I'd nearly been decapitated by one of the rooftop conductor poles when it broke loose from the overhead webwork of wires and came swinging past, boomlow, alongside the moving bus, sparking viciously and banging off a potted sidewalk tree a foot above my head, zizzing and snapping. Welcome to the Bay Area.

I had no real excuse for tears now, and wiped my eyes with the heel of my hand. My left hand; my *good* hand. I was still getting used to the weight of the new cast on my other one. One of our famous denizens of the streets had stopped to stare at me. I stared back, head to toe, from the cloud of gnats around his matted hair to the solid-carbon crustiness of his bare, black feet. He had caught me crying, with his mad-prophet eyes, and the grin that snaked his face lewdly open suggested that yes, I *should* howl, with grief, I *should* pull out a Mauser and start plugging pedestrians. I put my legs in gear instead, leaving him behind with the news kiosk, the scungy, sensationalist headlines, and all those horrifyingly flawless pictures of her. The bum and I ceased to exist for each other the moment we parted.

I know what happened to Tasha. Like a recurring dream, she showed up unannounced on my doorstep just four days ago. Like a ghost then, like a ghost now.

People read *People*. The truth, they never really want to know, and for good reason.

Her real name was Claudia Katz. In 1975, nobody important knew my name, or either of hers, and I'd already shot thousands of pictures of her. When I replaced my el cheapo scoop lamps with electronically synchro-

nized umbrella shades so new that their glitter hurt your eyes even when they *weren't* flashing, I commemorated the event by photographing her. New Year's Eve, 1974—five seconds before midnight, I let a whole roll rip past on autowind, catching her as she passed from one year into the next. Edited down, that sequence won me a plaque. Today, it's noteworthy only because Tasha is the subject.

"Claudia Katz is too spiky and dykey," she explained later, as she pulled off her workout shirt and aired a chest that would never need the assistance of the Maidenform Corporation, breasts that would soon have the subscribership of *Playboy* eating their fingernails. "Claudia Katz is somebody who does chain mail and leather doggie-collar spreads for Bitch Records. *Claudia Katz* is not somebody you'll find on the staple page in *Sports Illustrated's* Swimsuit Issue."

I pushed back an f-stop and refocused. "Part your lips. Stop. Give me the tip of your tongue, just inside your teeth." Her mouth was invitingly moist; the star-filters would trap some nice little highlights. *Click-whirr click-whirr*. "Tilt your head back. Not so much . . . stop." I got a magnified closeup of the muscles beneath her skin, moving through the slow, programmed dance of positions. My big fan was on, making her amber hair float. "Hands together, arms back over your head. Turn, turn, turn . . . whoa, right there, stop!" *Click-whirr*—another thousandth of a second, immobilized. "*Sports Illustrated?* Why bother aiming it at a bunch of beer-swilling beat-offs in baseball caps, anyway?"

"You don't understand the way the world works, do you?" She spoke to the camera lens, because she knew I was in there, watching. "You've got to make people look at your picture and either want you, or want to *be* you. When they anticipate your next picture, that means they're fantasizing about you. Saying to themselves, 'Geez, I wonder what she looks like in bed, without that damned bathing suit on?'"

It was my privilege to know the answer to that one already. Grinning, I baited her: "The women say that, do they?"

"No, not the women, you dork." The warm, come-hither expression on her face was entirely contrary to her tone. She was, after all, very good at her job. *Click-whirr*. "The men. When all the men in the country, in the world, lust for you, then you can say no to the lot of them. If all the men want you, then all the women lust to *be* you. Voilà."

"Excluding lesbians, Tibetan lamas and some Kalahari bushmen." Her reply begged my sarcasm. She expected it. "Not that, um, lust and envy aren't *admirable* goals . . ."

If I had not been shooting, her brow would have rearranged and a familiar crease would appear between her eyes, indicating her annoy-

ance at my childish, defeatist, irrelevant, smartass remark. And then she'd say—

"You just don't understand." Right on cue. "But I'll be on top someday. You'll see."

"I'd like to see you on top after you finish your shower." It flew out of my mouth before I could stop it. File a lawsuit if you want. "It's your turn."

She decided not to blow up, and rolled her eyes to keep from giggling. *Click-whirr*. My heart fumbled a beat. I'd just netted a shot of an honest-to-U.S.-Grant human being, peeking out from behind a cover-girl facade of plastic. Nude from the waist up, sensual not from flaunted sexuality, but because her expression let you in on the secret that the whole sham was strictly for laughs and wages. A real woman, not a fantasy image. I wanted that photo. It reduced the rest of the roll to an exhausted, mundane repertoire of tit shots—pretty billboard face, pasted-on bedroom eyes of that inhuman chromium color, the "ideal," a dime per double dozen from one shining sea to the next, from the four-star hookers at the Beverly Hills Hotel to the smartly attired, totally paranoid corporate ladies who took their Manhattan business lunches in neat quarters.

"To hell with the shower," she had said then, lunging at me with mischief in her eyes.

I still have that photo. Not framed, not displayed. I don't make the effort to look at it anymore. I can't.

Claudia—Tasha—got precisely what she wanted. That part you know, unless you've spent the last decade eating wallaby-burgers in the Australian outback. The tiny differences in the way we perceived the world and its opportunities finally grew large enough to wedge between us. Her astronomical income had little to do with it. It was me. I made the classic mistake of trying to keep her by blurting out proclamations of love before my career, my life, was fully mobilized. When you're clawing through the riptide of your twenties, it's like a cosmic rule that you cannot be totally satisfied by your emotional life and your professional life simultaneously. We had been climbing partners, until I put everything on hold to fall in love with her. So she left, and became famous. Not many people know my name even today. They don't have to; I pull down a plush enough income. But it did come to pass that everybody wanted Tasha. Everybody still does.

I was halfway through my third mug of coffee at the Hostel Restaurant when I admitted to myself that I was consciously avoiding going home. Bad stuff waited for me out there. A Latino busboy had made off with

my plate. Past the smokey front windows, Geary Street was acruise with the bunboys that gave the Tenderloin its rep. In New York, where things are less euphemistic, they're called fudgepackers. I wondered what gays made of all the media fuss over Tasha.

Nicole was giving me the eye. She's my favorite combat-hardened coffeeshop waitress in the charted universe, an elegant willowsprout of West Indies mocha black, with a heaving bosom and a lilting, exotic way of speaking the English language. When I watch her move about her chores at the Hostel, I think she'd probably jump my bones on the spot if she thought I could *click-whirr* her into the Tasha Vode saddle—world-wide model, budding cinema star, headliner. And still missing. When I try to formulate some logical nonsense for what happened to her, I fail just like I did with the street bum. Nothing comes out. Instead, I watch Nicole as she strolls over to recharge my cup. She watches me watching her.

“How'd you know I wanted more, Nicole?”

She narrows her panther eyes and blesses me with an evil smile. “Because you white boys *always* want more, hon.”

My house *cum* studio hangs off the north end of Fieldings' Point Pier, which is owned by a white-maned, sea-salt type named Dickie Barnhardt, whom no mortal dares address as “Richard.” He sold me my home and plays caretaker to his pier. I live in a fabulous, indifferently-planned spill-together of rooms, like building blocks dumped haphazardly into a corner. Spiderwebbing it together are twelve crooked little stairways, inside and out. At first I called it my Dr. Seuss House. On the very top is a lighthouse tower that still works. Dickie showed me how to operate it, and from time to time I play keeper of the maritime flame because the notion is so irresistibly romantic. In return for spiffing up the place, I got another plaque—this one from the U.S. Lighthouse Society in San Francisco. Lighthouses have long been outmoded by navigational technology, and the Society is devoted to a program of historical preservation. There's no use for my little beacon. But there are nights when I cannot bear to keep it dark.

After ten years without a postcard, Tasha knew exactly where to find me. Maybe she followed the light. I answered my downstairs door with the alkaline smell of developer clinging to my hands; the doorknob was greened from all the times I'd done it. And there she was.

Was I surprised? I knew instantly it was her, knew it from the way the ocean tilted and tried to slide off the edge of the world, knew it because all the organs in my body tried to rush together and clog up my throat.

"You look like you just swallowed a starfish," she said. She was burrowed into a minky-lush fur that hid everything but the tips of her boots. The chill sea breeze pushed wisps of her hair around. I don't have to describe what her face looked like. If you want to know, just haul your ass down to Slater's Periodicals and check out the covers of any half-dozen current glamour and pop-fashion magazines. *That's* what she looked like, brother.

Her eyes seemed backed up with tears, but maybe tears alone were insufficient to breach the Tasha forcefield, or maybe she used some brand of eyeliner so expensive that it was tear-resistant. I asked her why she was crying, invited her in, and then did not give her room to answer me. I was too busy babbling, trying to race past ten years in ten minutes and disguise my nervousness with light banter. She sensed my disorientation and rode it out, patiently, the way she used to. I fixed coffee and brandy. She sipped hers with picture-perfect lips, sitting at the breakfast overlook I'd glassed in last summer. I needed the drink. She needed contact, and hinted at it by letting her leg brush mine beneath the booth-style table. My need for chitchat and my awareness of the past hung around, dumbing things up like a stubborn chaperone. Beyond the booth's half-turret of windowpanes, green breakers crashed onto the rocks and foamed violently away.

Her eyes cleared, marking time between me and the ocean outside. They grew darkly stormy, registering the thunderheads that were rolling in with the dusk to lash the beach with an evening sweep of rain.

At last I ran out of stupid questions.

She closed my hand up in both of hers. My heartbeat meddled with my breathing. She had already guessed which of my odd little Caligari staircases led to the bedroom loft.

The night sky was embossed by tines of lightning somewhere between us and Japan. Fat drops splatted against the seaward hurricane glass and skidded to the right as a strong offshore wind caught and blew them. I had opened the shutters on the shore side, and the wooden blades of the ceiling fan cast down cool air to prickle our flesh, sweat-speckled from fervent but honest lovemaking.

A lot of women had drifted through my viewfinder after Tasha had left me. Except for two or three mental time-bombs and outright snow queens, I coupled enthusiastically with all of them. I forgot how to say no. Sometimes I was artificially nice; most of the time I was making the entire sex pay because one of their number had dumped me. The right people found out my name, yes. My studio filled up with eager young

lovelies. No brag, just a living. I settled into a pattern of rejecting them about the time they tried to form any sort of lasting attachment, or tried to storm my meticulously erected walls. Some of them were annoyingly persistent, but I got good at predicting when they would turn sloppy and pleading . . . and that made snuffing their flames oddly fulfilling. I was consistent, if not happy. I took a perverse pleasure in booting cover girls out of my bed on a regular basis, and hoped that Joe Normal was envious as hell.

Lust. Envy. Admirable goals, I thought, as she lay with her hair covering my face, both of her legs hugging one of mine. We had turned out to be pretty much alike after all.

When I mumbled, she stirred from her doze. "What . . .?"

"I said, I want a picture of you, just like you are, right this moment."

Her eyes snapped open, gleaming in the faint light. "No." She spoke into the hollow of my neck, her voice distant, the sound of it barely impressing the air. "No pictures. No more pictures. Ever."

The businessman part of my brain perked up: *What neurosis could this be?* Was Tasha Vode abandoning her career? Would it be as successful as her abandonment of me? And what was the difference? For what she earned in a month, I could buy the beach frontage below for several miles in both directions. What difference? I'd gotten her back, against all the rules of reality, and here I was looking for the loophole. Her career had cleaved us apart, and now it was making us cleave back together. Funny how a word can have opposing definitions.

After five minutes of tossing and turning, she decided not to make me work for it. "Got anything warm?" She cracked a helpless smile. "Down in the kitchen, I mean."

"Real cocoa. Loaded with crap that's bad for you. Not from an envelope. Topped with marshmallows, also real, packed with whatever carcinogens the cocoa doesn't have."

"Sounds luscious. Bring a whole pot."

"You can help."

"No. I want to watch the storm." Water pelted the glass. Now and then lightning would suggest how turbulent the ocean had gotten, and I thought of firing up my beacon. Perhaps there was a seafarer out there who was as romantic about boats as I was about lighthouses, and he'd gotten caught in the squall without the latest in hightech directional doodads.

I did it. Then I dusted off an old TV tray for use as a serving platter, and brought the cocoa pot and accoutrements up the narrow stairs, clanking and rattling all the way.

My carbon-arc beam scanned the surface of the water in long, lazy turns. She was facing her diaphanous reflection in the glass, looking through her own image into the dark void beyond.

I had pulled on canvas pants to make the kitchen run, but Tasha was still perfectly naked and nakedly perfect, a siren contemplating shipwrecks. She drifted back from the window. I pitied my imaginary seafarer, stuck out in the cold, away from the warmth of her.

"You know those natives in Africa?" she asked as I served. "The ones who wouldn't let missionaries take their pictures because they thought the camera would trap their souls?"

"It's a common belief. West Indians still hold to the voodoo value of snapshots. *Mucho* mojo. Even bad snapshots." I couldn't help that last remark. What a pro I am.

"You remember April McClanahan?" She spoke toward the sea. To my reflection.

"You mean Crystal Climax, right?"

She nodded. "Also of wide renown as Cherry Whipp."

All three were a lady with whom Tasha had shared a garret during her flirtation with the hardcore film industry in the early 1970s. Don't swallow the negative hype for a second—every woman who is anyone in film or modeling has made similar contacts. Tasha never moved beyond a couple of relatively innocuous missionary-position features, respectable porn for slumming middle-class couples; a one-week run at the Pussycat Theatre, max. April, on the other hand, moved into the porn mainstream—*Hustler* covers, videocassette toplines, "Fully Erect" notices in the film ratings. And no, she didn't get strangled or blow her brains all over a motel room with a Saturday Night Special. Last I heard, she was doing TV commercials for bleach and fabric softener as "Valerie Winston," sort of a Marilyn Chambers in reverse.

"April once told me she'd figured out, with a calculator, that she was responsible for more orgasms in one year than anybody else," Tasha said, holding the big porcelain mug with both hands to warm her palms. "She averaged out how many movie houses were showing her films, how many times per day, multiplied by however-many guys she figured were getting their jollies in the audience per show. Plus whoever was doing likewise to her pictures in God knows how many stroke magazines. Or gratifying themselves to the sex advice column she did for *Leather Life*. I remember her looking at me and saying, 'Think of all the energy that must produce. All those orgasms were born because of me. *Me.*'"

"I'm sure there are legions of guys getting their jollies to your photos,

too," I said. "No doubt, somebody is out there yanking his crank to Christie Brinkley's smile, right now."

"It's not the same thing. April was tough. She got something back." She sat on the bed facing me, tucking her legs beneath her. She reminded me of Edvard Eriksen's famous sculpture of the Little Mermaid, rendered not in bronze but shaped from milk-white moonstone, heated by living yellow electricity called down from a black sky, and warmed by warm Arctic eyes—the warmest blue there is in our world.

"You mean April didn't mind getting that porn-star rap laid on her—literally?"

I could see the sadness in her being blotted away by acid bitterness. "The people in porn have it easier. The thuds out there in Bozo-land know in their tiny little hearts that porn stars fuck for jobs. Whereas cover girls or legit models who are rarely seen in the buff, or full-frontal, are suspect."

"You can't deny the public their imaginary intrigues."

"What it always boils down to is, 'Climb off it, bitch—who did you *really* blow to get that last *Vogue* cover?' They feed off you. They achieve gratification in a far dirtier way, by wanting you and resenting you at the same time. By hating your success enough to keep all the tabloids in business. It's a draining thing, all taking and no giving, like . . ."

"Psychic vampirism?" It was so easy for someone in her position to sense that her public loved her only in the way a tumor loves its host. But a blacker part of my mind tasted a subtle tang of revenge. She'd left me to go chase what she wanted . . . and when she'd finally sunk in her teeth, she'd gotten the flavor of bile and chalk and ashes. I suppose I should have been ashamed of myself for embracing that hateful satisfaction so readily. And from the hurt neutrality on her face, she might have been reading the thoughts in my head. She watched her cocoa instead of drinking it—always a bad sign.

Just as much as I never said no, I never apologized. Not for anything.

After a cool silence, she said, "You're saying to yourself, 'She's got it made, for christsake. What right does she have to be dissatisfied with anything?' Right?"

"Maybe a tiny bit, yeah." She let me take her hand regardless. She needed the contact. The missing ten years settled between us to fog the issue. I was resentful, yes. Did I want to help her? Same answer. When I guiltily tried to pull back my hand, she kept hold of it. It made me feel forgiven; absolved, almost.

"In science class, in eighth grade, they taught us that when you smell



something, your nose is actually drawing in tiny molecular bits of whatever it is you're smelling. Particles."

"Which means you clamped both hands over your mouth and nose whenever you passed a dog turd on the sidewalk after school, am I right?" My prescription for sticky emotional situations is rigid: Always—*always* joke your way out.

Her smile came and went. "The idea stuck in my head. If you smelled something long enough, it would run out of molecules and poof—it wouldn't exist anymore."

"Uh-huh, if you stood around sniffing for a couple of eons." Fortunately, I'd forgotten most of the junk with which school had tried to clog my head. About hard science I knew squat, like math. But I did know that there were billions or trillions of molecules in any given object.

"My point is that each one of us only has so much to give." She cleared her throat, almost as though it hurt her, and pressed valiantly onward. "What if you were to run out of pieces all of a sudden?"

"Happens all the time," I said airily. "That's what a nervous breakdown is. Entertainers who can't give their audiences an ounce more, collapse onstage. Corporate guys get physically ill and can't go near a meeting room. People exceed their operational limits . . . and you're in one of the most high-pressure professions there is."

"No." She was shaking her head to prevent me from clouding her train of thought. "I mean run out of pieces literally. Suppose every photo of me ever taken was an infinitesimal piece? Every magazine ad, every negative, every frame of motion picture film—another tiny molecule of me, stolen away to feed an audience that is *never* satiated. And when someone is fully consumed—vampirized—they move on, still hungry, to pick their next victim by making him or her a star. That's why they're called consumers."

I looked up from the muddy lees in my cup just in time to see the passing lighthouse beam blank the ghost of her reflection from the windowpanes. Just like her smile, it came and went.

Her voice had downshifted into the husky and quavering register of confession. Now I was really uncomfortable. "I know there are celebrities who've had their picture taken two million more times than I have. But maybe they can afford it." She stretched across the bed to place her head on my thigh and hug my waist, connecting herself. "Maybe some of us don't have so many pieces . . ."

I held her while the storm rallied for a renewed assault. My modest but brave beam of lamplight chopped through it. She did not grimace,

or redden, or sob; her tears just began spilling out, coursing down in perfect wet lines to darken my pantleg.

Did I want to help her?

She feared that consumers wanted so much of her that pretty soon there would be nothing left to consume. And Claudia Katz no longer existed, except in my head. I'd fallen in love with her, become addicted to her . . . and now she was clinging to me because Tasha Vode was almost used up, and after that, if there was no Claudia, there was nothing. She had not brought her exhaustion home to my stoop to prove she could still jerk my leash after ten years. She had done it because the so-called friends who had gorged themselves on her personality were now nodding and clucking about celebrity lifestyles and answering their machines and juggling in new appointments to replace her as the undertow dragged her away to oblivion.

I stroked her hair until it was all out of her face. The tears dried while the seastorm churned. She snoozed, curled up, her face at peace, and I gently disengaged. Then, with a zealot's devotion toward proving her fears were all in her imagination, I went downstairs to load up one of my Nikons.

I asked her how she felt the next morning. When she said terrific, I spilled the beans.

"You *what*—?"

"I repeat for clarity: I took pictures of you while you were asleep. Over a hundred exposures of you wound up in my dark blue sheets, sleeping through a gale. And guess what—you're still among the living this morning." I refilled her coffee cup and used my tongs to pluck croissants out of the warmer.

She cut loose a capacious sigh, but put her protests on hold. "Don't do that again. Or you'll lose me."

I wasn't sure whether she meant she'd fade to nothingness on the spot, or stomp out if I defied her superstitions a second time. "You slept like a stone, love. Barely changed position all night." My ego was begging to be told that our mattress gymnastics had put her under, but when I saw the care she took to lift her coffee cup with both hands, I knew better.

"Look at this shit," she said with disgust. "I can barely hold up my head, let alone my coffee. I'm slouching. Models aren't supposed to *slouch*, for christsake." She forced her sitting posture straight and smiled weakly. Her voice was a bit hoarse this morning, almost clogged.

"Hey, lady—slouch away." Worry stabbed at my insides while I tried to sound expansive and confident. "Do what thou wilt. Sleep all day if

that's your pleasure. Just wait till you discover what I've learned to cook in the last ten years. Real salads. Stuff you have to sauté. Food with *wine* in it. I can artistically dish up all the squares you require. Loaf on the beach; read my library. I have said it; it is good." I watched a glint of happiness try to burn away the caution in her eyes. She did so want to believe me. "And no more photographs. Promise. Anybody who tries has gotta shoot through yours truly."

She brightened at that. I'd gotten the reaction I wanted from her. It was the challenge-and-reward game. And goddamned if that tiny acid-drop of doubt didn't settle into my brain, sizzling—*what if what if what if*.

What if I was playing it safe because she might be right?

"I don't want to see those pictures," she said. "Don't even develop them."

"I'll toss 'em in the woodstove right now, if that's what you'd like." I'd made my point.

She gave a theatrical shudder. "Don't burn them. That's too much like a horror story I read once. I might shuffle off the coil along with my own pictures."

The rolls of film were lined up on my miscellaneous shelf downstairs, in the darkroom, the room with the red lightbulbs. Expose the film to anything but that mellow, crimson glow and it blanked into silver nitrate nothingness. The rolls could stay down there, sealed into their little black plastic vials. Forever, if that's what she wanted.

She kept watch on the sea while we destroyed our Continental breakfast. "I thought maybe we could brave the overcast later, and drive down past Point Pitt for dinner," I said. "Steaks, salads and a bottle or two of Cabernet. If anybody asks whether you're Tasha Vode, just blink and say, 'Who?'"

The life had surged back in to her expression. "Maybe. Or maybe seafood. But I want you to do something for me, first."

"Your wish . . ."

"Don't you have any work to do today?"

Who were we kidding? I think we both knew I'd do almost anything she asked. "Nothing that can't wait."

"Then carry me back up to the bedroom."

My narrow little stairway was a tight spot, but we negotiated it successfully after a mild bump or two. Our robes got in the way, so we left them crumpled on the stairs about halfway up.

Her need for contact was vital.

Outside the bedroom window, it got dark. I did not notice. All I could see was her.

Her eyes were capable of a breath-catching syllabary of expressions, and I felt my own eyes become lenses, trying to record them. I stopped being friend or lover to be a camera, to try and trap what it was about her that made strangers hear those jungle drums. There were thousands, maybe millions of men out there who fantasized being inside her the way I was, who played my role and spoke my half of the dialogue whenever they passed a newsstand. Their wanting never ceased.

Her eyes told me she knew what I was up to. They did not approve.

Hers was one of the few callings that made you a veteran before puberty was left behind. If you lucked out, it could make you wealthy while still a child; if you weren't so lucky it could leave you a burned out has-been before you graduated high school. The attrition rate was worse than that for professional athletes, who could at least fall back on commercials for razors and lite beer when middle age called them out. But she did not seem the sort of human being who could relish the living death of celebrity game shows. Staying beautiful had been an unending war; each touchup a skirmish that stole away another irreclaimable chunk of time. Doing it for ten years, and staying the best, had been draining. Her outside was being used up. Her hipbones felt like flint arrowheads beneath soft tissue paper.

Her hand slid down and felt the cingulum cinched drawstring tight above my balls. Comprehension dawned in her eyes, followed by that strange tolerance of hers for my various idiocies. I can't relate the exact sequence (to come was, for me, a necessary agony by now), but I was almost certain that her rapidfire contractions began the instant she slipped the knot of the cingulum. Unbound, I offloaded lavishly. Her fingers whitened with pressure on my shoulders, then relaxed, reddening with blood. I watched the pupils of those warm Arctic eyes expand hotly in the dimness as she took what was mine. Until that moment, her own orgasms had seemed insubstantial somehow. Disconnected from her. Spasms of her equipment more than sparky showers in her brain. Her breath had barely raised condensation on my skin. Now she came into focus, filled, flushed, and radiating heat.

After holding me for a lapse of time impossible to measure, she said, "Don't try to impress. You're not performing with a capital *P*." Her eyes saw that I had been intimidated by the imagined skills of her past decade of lovers, and thus the girdle cord trick. Stupid. "Don't you see? You're the only one who ever gave anything back."

"Tasha, you don't really believe that—"

“Try Claudia.” It was not a command but a gentle urging. But it, too, was vital. “You’re the only one who can give me back some of myself; replace what the others have taken. Give me more.” Her reverent tone bordered on love—the word I could rarely force myself to speak, even frivolously.

Who better to give her back some of herself? I was a goddamn repository of her identity. With other women I had never bothered worrying, and so had never been befuddled as I was now. I’d made love to Claudia, not the exterior self that the rest of the world was busy eating. And now she was steering.

I gave her back to herself; her eyes said so, her voice said so, and I tried to hush the voice in my head that said I was not being compensated for this drain. I tried to ignore the numberless black canisters of film that beckoned me from the room with the red light. And later, past midnight, when the storm thundered in, I carefully took twice what I had given her. No matter how much we have, as Nicole the waitress would say, we always want more.

“Skull full of sparrow shit,” she said the following day, as we bumped knees and elbows trying to dress for dinner. “Gorgeous but ditzy. Vacuous. Vapid. Pampered. Transient values. A real spoiled-rotten—”

“I think I get the stereotype,” I said. “You’re just not stupid enough to be happy as a model anymore, right?”

“Ex-model.” She watched the sea bounce back the glare of late afternoon. “You don’t believe me, do you?”

“What I believe scares the crap out of me.” I tried to veneer what I said with good humor, to defang my fears. “I believe, for example, that you might be a ghost. And ghosts never stay.”

She waggled her eyebrows. “I could haunt your lighthouse. Or maybe I’m just your wish-fulfillment.”

“Don’t laugh. I’ve often thought that I’m not really earning a living as a photographer.” Merely speaking that last word caused the slightest hesitation in the natural flow of her movements; she was *that* sensitized to it. “I’m not really sleeping with Tas . . . uh, Claudia Katz.” She caught that slip, too, but forgave it. “Actually, I’m really a dirtbag litter basket picker up in the Mission. And all of this is a hallucinatory fantasy I invented while loitering near a magazine rack with Tasha Vode’s picture at hand, hm?”

“Ack,” she said with mock horror. “You’re one of *them*. The pod-folk.”

“Are we gone, or what?”

She stepped back from the mirror, inside of a bulky, deep-blue ski sweater with maroon patterning, soft boots of gray suede, and black

slacks so tight they made my groin ache. Her eyes filled up with me, and they were the aquamarine color of the sunlit ocean outside. "We're gone," she said, and led the way down the stairs.

I followed, thinking that when she left me again I'd at least have those hundreds of photographs of her in my bed. Ghosts never stay.

Outside there was a son of a bitch, an asshole.

The son of a bitch was crouched in ambush right next to my front door. His partner, the asshole, was leaning on my XLS, getting cloudy fingerprints all over the front fender. I had backed out the front door, to lock it, and heard his voice talking, before anything else.

"Miss Vode, do you have any comment on your abrupt—

Tasha—*Claudia*—started to scream.

I turned as she recoiled and grabbed my hand. I saw the asshole. Any humanity he might have claimed was obliterated by the vision of a huge, green check for an exclusive article that lit up his eyes. A pod-man. Someone had recognized us in the restaurant last night, and sent him to ambush us in the name of the public's right to know. He brandished a huge audio microphone at us as though it was a scepter of power. It had a red foam windscreen and looked like a phallic lollipop.

Her scream sliced his question neatly off. She scrambled backward, hair flying, trying to interpose me between herself and the enemy, clawing at her head, crushing her eyes shut and *screaming*. That sound filled my veins with liquid nitrogen.

The son of a bitch was behind us. From the instant we had stepped into the sunlight, he'd had us nailed in his viewfinder. The video rig into which he was harnessed ground silently away; the red bubble light over the lens hood was on.

And Tasha screamed.

Maybe she jerked her hand away, maybe I let it go, but her grip went foggy in mine as I launched myself at the cameraman, eating up the distance between us like a barracuda. Only once in my whole life had I ever hit a man in anger, and now I doubled my own personal best by delivering a roundhouse punch right into the black glass maw of his lens, filling his face up with his own camera, breaking his nose, two front teeth, and the three middle fingers of my fist. He faded to black and went down like a medieval knight trapped by the weight of his own armor. I swarmed over him and used my good hand to rip out his electronic heart, wresting away portacam, tape and all. Cables shredded like torn ligaments and shiny tape viscera trailed as I heaved it, spinning, over the pier rail and into a sea the same color as Tasha's eyes. The red light expired.

Her scream . . . wasn't. There was a sound of pain as translucent as rice paper, thin as a flake of mica, drowned out by the roar of water meeting beach.

By the time I cranked my head around—two dozen slow-motion shots, easy—neither of her was there anymore. I thought I saw her eyes, in Arctic-cold afterburn, winking out last.

“Did you see—?”

“You're trespassing!” bellowed Dickie Barnhardt, wobbling toward the asshole with his side-to-side Popeye gait, pressed flat and pissed off. The asshole's face was flash-frozen into a bloodless bas-relief of shock and disbelief. His mouth hung slack, showing off a lot of expensive fillings. His mike lay forgotten at his feet.

“Did you see . . . did . . . she just . . .”

Dickie bounced his ashwood walking stick off the asshole's forehead, and he joined his fallen mike in a boneless tumble on the planks of the pier. Dickie's face was alight with a bizarre expression that said it had been quite a while since he'd found a good excuse to raise physical mayhem, and he was proud of his forthright defense of tenant and territory. “You okay?” he said, squinting at me and spying the fresh blood on my hand.

“Dickie, did you see Tasha?” My own voice was switching in and out. My throat constricted. My unbroken hand closed on empty space. Too late.

He grinned a seaworthy grin at me and nudged the unconscious idiot at his feet, who remained slack. “Who's Tasha, son?”

I drink my coffee left-handed, and the cast mummifying my right hand gives me something to stare at contemplatively.

I think most often of that videotape, decomposing down there among the sand sharks and the jellyfish that sometimes bob to the surface near Dickie's pier. I think that the tiny bit of footage recorded by that poor, busted-up son-of-a-bitch cameraman would not have mattered one damn, if I hadn't shot so much film of Tasha to prove she had nothing to fear. So many pieces. I pushed her right to the edge, cannibalizing her in the name of love.

The black plastic cans of film are still on the shelf down in my darkroom, lined up like inquisitors already convinced of my guilt. The thought of dunking that film in developer makes me want to stick a gun in my ear and pull the trigger, twice if I had the time.

Then I consider another way out, and wonder how long it would take me to catch up with her; how many pieces I have.

I never cried much before. Now the tears unload at the least provocation. It's sloppy, and messy, and unprofessional, and I hate it. It makes Nicole stare at me the way the street bum did, like I've tipped over into psycholand.

When she makes her rounds to fill my cup, she watches me. The wariness in her eyes is new. She sees my notice dip from her eyes to her sumptuous chest and back, in a guilty but unalterable ritual. I force a smile for her, gamely, but it stays pasted across my face a beat too long, insisting too urgently that everything is okay. She doesn't ask. I wave my unbroken hand over my cup to indicate *no more*, and Nicole tilts her head with a queer, new expression—as though this white boy is trying to trick her. But she knows better. She always has.





## In the Hour Before Dawn

Brad Strickland

*Born in New Holland, Georgia on October 27, 1947, Brad Strickland says that he's just a "small-town kid still trying to make good." Strickland holds a Ph.D. from the University of Georgia, and he and his family now reside in Oakwood, Georgia; he teaches English at both high school and college levels.*

*Brad Strickland's short fiction has appeared in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction, Amazing, The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, and Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. His first novel, To Stand Beneath the Sun (science fiction) was published last year by Signet; the same publisher brought out his fantasy novel, Moon Dreams, this year. Strickland's next book will be "a horror novel set in North (NOT 'Northern.' Only Yankees say 'Northern') Georgia. This is called ShadowShow and marks a return to sorts—my first story was a horror piece set in North Georgia."*

CHARLES WAS unmistakably in the country of dreams. He stood alone in a shallow, bowl-like valley, scooped from fine-grained, silvery sand. Here and there boulders interrupted the gently curved surface, boulders that were themselves smooth and golden, like polished statues of sleeping elephants.

Charles' own body seemed indistinct. He could not say whether he wore a suit, shirt and trousers, or nothing at all. Otherwise his senses registered nothing unusual. The air smelled like air. When he stooped and thrust his hand into the sand, it was silky and cool to the touch. It tasted of nothing. Standing with head bowed, as if intent on prayer or thought, he heard no sound. And as for vision, except for the bowl-shaped valley and the boulders, all he could see was the sky, doomed like a lid badly put into place over him, a luminescent mother-of-pearl gray all around the horizon's edge, darkening in the concavity overhead to a red-purple, reminding him of the color of a bruise.

*I am dreaming*, Charles thought suddenly. How strange, to be dreaming, and to be aware that he was dreaming! As strange, he suspected, as

to be fully awake and to be aware that one was fully awake. The notion struck him as in some sense profound, and to himself, he thought, *That is something I must remember. I must hold on to that idea for the time when I awake.*

“Excuse me.” In that silence the voice boomed loud as an earthquake, startling as summer thunder. “Excuse me. I am dreaming of you, I know, but I don’t know you.”

Charles turned. The speaker had just come from behind one of the boulders. He was a man about Charles’ age—thirty-one—but shorter, much darker of hair and eye, and more muscular. Oddly, Charles had less trouble seeing the stranger than he had seeing himself: the man wore tan trousers, no shirt, no shoes. Heat glistened in the perspiration underlying the dark mat of chest hair. “That’s odd,” Charles said. “I am dreaming of you, and you believe yourself to be dreaming of me. How very odd.”

The other man had a one-sided smile, a quarter inch higher on the left side of his face than his right. “You’re wrong. *I am dreaming you. Don’t confuse yourself by imagining you really exist.*”

Charles laughed. “Certainly I exist. I have a name and address. I am Charles Dayton, and I live on Revere Drive in Somerville. My students at the university would be very surprised to find that I *don’t* exist. Maybe not unhappy, but definitely surprised.”

The stranger shook his head, still smiling his one-sided smile. “I don’t know how I came to dream of a teacher from Somerville. I don’t even know where that is—if there is such a place. But *I know* I exist. I’m Paul Dupont. I’m a trial lawyer. And I live in Sierra Heights, outside of Santa Rosita, with my wife.”

“I’ve got a wife, too,” Charles blurted, feeling obscurely as if the other had scored a point. “Now look, I never dream of strangers. Always people I know, or sort of odd conglomerations of people I know. I don’t know you—and I don’t believe there’s even a place named Santa Rosita.”

Paul looked annoyed. “Come to think of it, I’ve never dreamed up a stranger, either. Not one with a phony name and address, anyhow. But there’s always a first time.”

“What am I wearing?” Charles asked.

Paul frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

“Come on,” Charles said. “You call yourself a lawyer—you’re supposed to have some intelligence, aren’t you? Just tell me what you see. How am I dressed?”

“You’re barefoot. You have on some white shorts; tennis shorts, I guess. That’s all. So what?”

“What are you wearing?” Charles asked.

Paul frowned down at himself. “Something’s keeping me from seeing it. I guess I haven’t dreamed that part yet.”

“You’re not dreaming at all. Get it through your head that *you’re* the imaginary one. I am real, and my home and family are real. There’s no Paul, no wife, no Santa Rosita.”

“Nonsense!” The lawyer paced back and forth on the silver sand, his head down. Then he paused and gazed sidelong at Charles. “Is it not true that you never know when you’re dreaming?”

“No. I know I’m dreaming now.”

“Have you ever done it before? Known you were dreaming while you were dreaming?”

“Not that I remember.”

Paul turned to face Charles. “Then you would say that it’s unusual for you to be aware of your own dreams, while you are actually dreaming?”

“Very unusual,” Charles agreed, amused at how much like a real lawyer his imaginary lawyer sounded.

Paul’s voice rang with triumph: “Then that indicates, wouldn’t you say, that the probability is that you are not dreaming now—because you cannot dream, you are just a figment of my imagination?”

“That’s idiotic. Look, Paul whatever-your-name-is, you may think you’re real, but that’s only because I dreamed you so well. I gave you the illusion of reality so strongly that you believe in yourself.”

Paul wouldn’t give up. “But isn’t it at least as likely that I have given you the illusion of reality? That I have dreamed *you* so well that you believe you exist, when in fact you do not?” He stooped suddenly, snatched a handful of sand, and flung it at Charles.

Charles spun, lifting his arm to ward off the stinging particles. They hit forearm, shoulder, neck, but missed his eyes. “Hey!”

“Funny,” Paul said. “I thought it’d go right through you. Maybe I ought to try a rock.”

Charles rubbed a hand across his face and held up a dripping palm. “Look at that. I suppose you think that isn’t real?”

“Imaginary sweat,” scoffed Paul. “You fool. Even if you were right, you’d still be dreaming it, so even then it wouldn’t be real. And if I dreamed of something as unpleasant as you, I could certainly dream of sweat.”

Charles stalked over to Paul. He came so close he could feel the exhaled breath of the other man stirring the air, could hear the faint rush of it through the other’s nose and sinuses. “See if this seems real,” he said, and hit the other man in the mouth.

Paul reeled back, blood spurting from a cut lip. He shook his head, scattering drops that made pear-shaped red spatters on the sand, and then lunged head down at Charles. The two rolled over in the silver sand, and though Charles strained muscle and sinew, it was no use. They were too evenly matched and too inexperienced for either to get a temporary advantage.

Charles' breath burned hot and harsh when at last both of them rested on hands and knees, a yard away from each other. Both were panting, sweating, and bleeding. "This is nonsense," Paul said. "Soon I'll wake up, and you will be gone."

"I agree," Charles said. "Except *I'll* wake up, and you will vanish."

"Then all we have to do is wait." Paul pushed up, grimacing as if weary and in pain. He backed away and sat on one of the golden boulders. His shoulders bowed and his chest heaved.

Charles sank onto another stone. He felt every ache in his muscles, every rip in his skin, every drop of sweat that crawled like a warm little snail down his face. *I am real*, Charles thought. *I will wake up, and it will all be as it has been before. He will vanish.* He looked into the other's haunted eyes. *He really believes that he is the dreamer*, Charles thought. *He really does—just as I do.* Panic fluttered light butterfly wings in his belly. *What if he is right?* Charles wondered for the first time.

Almost simultaneously, he read the exact thought in the other's eyes.

Exhausted, helpless beneath the bruised dome of the dreamed sky, the two sat staring at one another, hating one another, and waiting out the hour before dawn.

Waking came quickly, with an outrush of breath. He looked up at the familiar white ceiling. From the corner of his left eye, he could see the night table where he had carelessly thrown his trousers last night. Through the open bedroom door came kitchen sounds and smells. Meg making Monday's breakfast for the two of them.

He had not wept in ages, but he did now. He closed his eyes. "God," he said. "What did I do to deserve that?" Then he laughed silently, his chest bucking beneath the sheet.

"You awake?" Meg called.

He did not trust himself to speak.

After a moment she called again, closer, louder, "Honey, wake up. Time to get going. You have to be in court at nine."

He frowned. "Court? What the hell do you mean?"

A strange woman stood in the doorway. "Paul, get up. What's got into you this morning?"

Open-mouthed, she backed into the hallway as the man in the bed held out his dark-skinned arms, studied his compact hands, and started to scream.



# Necros

Brian Lumley

*Brian Lumley is another stalwart from the early volumes of The Year's Best Horror Stories who returns to the series after too long an absence. Chalk it up to a recent series of successful horror novels and an excursion into heroic fantasy which have reduced his output of horror stories. Born in Horden, Durham on December 2, 1937, Lumley initially made his mark as an indefatigable writer of Lovecraftian horror fiction with such books as The Caller of the Black, The Burrowers Beneath, Beneath the Moors, The Transition of Titus Crow, and The Horror at Oakdene. It has been pointed out that Lumley was born some nine months after Lovecraft's death.*

*Trained as a sawyer, Brian Lumley joined the army at age 21 and served 22 years in Berlin and Cyprus among other postings. Since retiring from the army six years ago, he has devoted himself full time to writing. Two years ago he moved to a Devon fishing village, where he has recently finished Necroscope II, a horror novel that makes about his twenty-fifty book. Lumley is an avid swimmer and spear-fisher and is fond of seafood in all its most wriggly forms. So much for the Lovecraft connection.*

## I

AN OLD WOMAN in a faded blue frock and black head-square paused in the shade of Mario's awning and nodded good-day. She smiled a gap-toothed smile. A bulky, slouch-shouldered youth in jeans and a stained yellow T-shirt—a slope-headed idiot, probably her grandson—held her hand, drooling vacantly and fidgeting beside her.

Mario nodded good-naturedly, smiled, wrapped a piece of stale *fuccaccia* in greaseproof paper and came from behind the bar to give it to her. She clasped his hand, thanked him, turned to go.

Her attention was suddenly arrested by something she saw across the road. She started, cursed vividly, harshly, and despite my meager knowledge of Italian I picked up something of the hatred in her tone. "Devil's



spawn!" She said it again. "Dog! Swine!" She pointed a shaking hand and finger, said yet again: "Devil's spawn!" before making the two-fingered, double-handed stabbing sign with which the Italians ward off evil. To do this it was first necessary that she drop her salted bread, which the idiot youth at once snatched up.

Then, still mouthing low, guttural imprecations, dragging the shuffling, *fuccia*-munching cretin behind her, she hurried off along the street and disappeared into an alley. One word that she had repeated over and over again stayed in my mind: "*Necros! Necros!*" Though the word was new to me, I took it for a curse-word. The accent she put on it had been poisonous.

I sipped at my Negroni, remained seated at the small circular table beneath Mario's awning and stared at the object of the crone's distaste. It was a motorcar, a white convertible Rover and this year's model, inching slowly forward in a stream of holiday traffic. And it was worth looking at if only for the girl behind the wheel. The little man in the floppy white hat beside her—well, he was something else, too. But *she* was—just something else.

I caught a glimpse, sufficient to feel stunned. That was good. I had thought it was something I could never know again: that feeling a man gets looking at a beautiful girl. Not after Linda. And yet—

She was young, say twenty-four or -five, some three or four years my junior. She sat tall at the wheel, slim, raven-haired under a white, wide-brimmed summer hat which just missed matching that of her companion, with a complexion cool and creamy enough to pour over peaches. I stood up—yes, to get a better look—and right then the traffic came to a momentary standstill. At that moment, too, she turned her head and looked at me. And if the profile had stunned me . . . well, the full frontal knocked me dead. The girl was simply, classically, beautiful.

Her eyes were of a dark green but very bright, slightly tilted and perfectly oval under straight, thin brows. Her cheeks were high, her lips a red Cupid's bow, her neck long and white against the glowing yellow of her blouse. And her smile—

—Oh, yes, she smiled.

Her glance, at first cool, became curious in a moment, then a little angry, until finally, seeing my confusion—that smile. And as she turned her attention back to the road and followed the stream of traffic out of sight, I saw a blush of color spreading on the creamy surface of her cheek. Then she was gone.

Then, too, I remembered the little man who sat beside her. Actually, I hadn't seen a great deal of him, but what I had seen had given me the

creeps. He too had turned his head to stare at me, leaving in my mind's eye an impression of beady bird eyes, sharp and intelligent in the shade of his hat. He had stared at me for only a moment, and then his head had slowly turned away; but even when he no longer looked at me, when he stared straight ahead, it seemed to me I could feel those raven's eyes upon me, and that a query had been written in them.

I believed I could understand it, that look. He must have seen a good many young men staring at him like that—or rather, at the girl. His look had been a threat in answer to my threat—and because he was practiced in it I had certainly felt the more threatened!

I turned to Mario, whose English was excellent. “She has something against expensive cars and rich people?”

“Who?” he busied himself behind his bar.

“The old lady, the woman with the idiot boy.”

“Ah!” he nodded. “Mainly against the little man, I suspect.”

“Oh?”

“You want another Negroni?”

“OK—and one for yourself—but tell me about this other thing, won't you?”

“If you like—but you're only interested in the girl, yes?” He grinned.

I shrugged. “She's a good-looker . . .”

“Yes, I saw her.” Now he shrugged. “That other thing—just old myths and legends, that's all. Like your English Dracula, eh?”

“Transylvanian Dracula,” I corrected him.

“Whatever you like. And Necros: that's the name of the spook, see?”

“Necros is the name of a vampire?”

“A spook, yes.”

“And this is a real legend? I mean, historical?”

He made a fifty-fifty face, his hands palms-up. “Local, I guess. Ligurian. I remember it from when I was a kid. If I was bad, old Necros sure to come and get me. Today,” again the shrug, “it's forgotten.”

“Like the bogeyman,” I nodded.

“Eh?”

“Nothing. But why did the old girl go on like that?”

Again he shrugged. “Maybe she think that old man Necros, eh? She crazy, you know? Very backward. The whole family.”

I was still interested. “How does the legend go?”

“The spook takes the life out of you. You grow old, spook grows young. It's a bargain you make: he gives you something you want, gets what he wants. What he wants is your youth. Except he uses it up quick and needs more. All the time, more youth.”

“What kind of bargain is that?” I asked. “What does the victim get out of it?”

“Gets what he wants,” said Mario, his brown face cracking into another grin. “In your case the girl, eh? *If* the little man was Necros . . .”

He got on with his work and I sat there sipping my Negroni. End of conversation. I thought no more about it—until later.

## II

Of course, I should have been in Italy with Linda, but . . . I had kept her “Dear John” for a fortnight before shredding it, getting mindlessly drunk and starting in on the process of forgetting. That had been a month ago. The holiday had already been booked and I wasn’t about to miss out on my trip to the sun. And so I had come out on my own. It was hot, the swimming was good, life was easy and the food superb. With just two days left to enjoy it, I told myself it hadn’t been bad. But it would have been better with Linda.

Linda . . . She was still on my mind—at the back of it, anyway—later that night as I sat in the bar of my hotel beside an open bougainvillaea-decked balcony that looked down on the bay and the seafront lights of the town. And maybe she wasn’t all that far back in my mind—maybe she was right there in front—or else I was just plain daydreaming. Whichever, I missed the entry of the lovely lady and her shriveled companion, failing to spot and recognize them until they were taking their seats at a little table just the other side of the balcony’s sweep.

This was the closest I’d been to her, and—

Well, first impressions hadn’t lied. This girl *was* beautiful. She didn’t look quite as young as she’d first seemed—my own age, maybe—but beautiful she certainly was. And the old boy? He must be, could only be, her father. Maybe it sounds like I was a little naive, but with her looks this lady really didn’t need an old man. And if she did need one it didn’t have to be *this* one.

By now she’d seen me and my fascination with her must have been obvious. Seeing it she smiled and blushed at one and the same time, and for a moment turned her eyes away—but only for a moment. Fortunately her companion had his back to me or he must have known my feelings at once; for as she looked at me again—fully upon me this time—I could have sworn I read an invitation in her eyes, and in that same moment any bitter vows I may have made melted away completely and were forgotten. God, *please* let him be her father!

For an hour I sat there, drinking a few too many cocktails, eating olives

and potato crisps from little bowls on the bar, keeping my eyes off the girl as best I could, if only for common decency's sake. But . . . all the time I worried frantically at the problem of how to introduce myself, and as the minutes ticked by it seemed to me that the most obvious way must also be the best.

But how obvious would it be to the old boy?

And the damnable thing was that the girl hadn't given me another glance since her original—invitation? Had I mistaken that look of hers?—or was she simply waiting for me to make the first move? *God, let him be her father!*

She was sipping Martinis, slowly; he drank a rich red wine, in some quantity. I asked a waiter to replenish their glasses and charge it to me. I had already spoken to the bar steward, a swarthy, friendly little chap from the South called Francesco, but he hadn't been able to enlighten me. The pair were not resident, he assured me; but being resident myself I was already pretty sure of that.

Anyway, my drinks were delivered to their table; they looked surprised; the girl put on a perfectly innocent expression, questioned the waiter, nodded in my direction and gave me a cautious smile, and the old boy turned his head to stare at me. I found myself smiling in return but avoiding his eyes, which were like coals now, sunken deep in his brown-wrinkled face. Time seemed suspended—if only for a second—then the girl spoke again to the waiter and he came across to me.

"Mr. Collins, sir, the gentleman and the young lady thank you and request that you join them." Which was everything I had dared hope for—for the moment.

Standing up I suddenly realized how much I'd had to drink. I willed sobriety on myself and walked across to their table. They didn't stand up but the little chap said, "Please sit." His voice was a rustle of dried grass. The waiter was behind me with a chair. I sat.

"Peter Collins," I said. "How do you do, Mr—er?—"

"Karpethes," he answered. "Nichos Karpethes. And this is my wife, Adrienne." Neither one of them had made the effort to extend their hands, but that didn't dismay me. Only the fact that they were married dismayed me. He must be very, very rich, this Nichos Karpethes.

"I'm delighted you invited me over," I said, forcing a smile, "but I see that I was mistaken. You see, I thought I heard you speaking English, and I—"

"Thought we were English?" she finished it for me. "A natural error. Originally I am Armenian, Nichos is Greek, of course. We do not speak

each other's tongue, but we do both speak English. Are you staying here, Mr. Collins?"

"Er, yes—for one more day and night. Then—" I shrugged and put on a sad look, "—back to England, I'm afraid."

"Afraid?" the old boy whispered. "There is something to fear in a return to your homeland?"

"Just an expression," I answered. "I meant I'm afraid that my holiday is coming to an end."

He smiled. It was a strange, wistful sort of smile, wrinkling his face up like a little walnut. "But your friends will be glad to see you again. Your loved ones—?"

I shook my head. "Only a handful of friends—none of them really close—and no loved ones. I'm a loner, Mr. Karpethes."

"A loner?" His eyes glowed deep in their sockets and his hands began to tremble where they gripped the table's rim. "Mr. Collins, you don't—"

"We understand," she cut him off. "For although we are together, we too, in our way, are loners. Money has made Nichos lonely, you see? Also, he is not a well man, and time is short. He will not waste what time he has on frivolous friendships. As for myself—people do not understand our being together, Nichos and I. They pry, and I withdraw. And so I too am a loner."

There was no accusation in her voice, but still I felt obliged to say: "I certainly didn't intend to pry, Mrs.—"

"Adrienne," she smiled. "Please. No, of course you didn't. I would not want you to think we thought that of you. Anyway I will *tell* you why we are together, and then it will be put aside."

Her husband coughed, seemed to choke, struggled to his feet. I stood up and took his arm. He at once shook me off—with some distaste, I thought—but Adrienne had already signaled to a waiter. "Assist Mr. Karpethes to the gentleman's room," she quickly instructed in very good Italian. "And please help him back to the table when he has recovered."

As he went Karpethes gesticulated, probably tried to say something to me by way of an apology, choked again and reeled as he allowed the waiter to help him from the room.

"I'm . . . sorry," I said, not knowing what else to say.

"He has attacks." She was cool. "Do not concern yourself. I am used to it."

We sat in silence for a moment. Finally I began. "You were going to tell me—"

"Ah, yes! I had forgotten. It is a symbiosis."

"Oh?"

“Yes. I need the good life he can give me, and he needs . . . my youth? We supply each other’s needs.” And so, in a way, the old woman with the idiot boy hadn’t been wrong after all. A sort of bargain had indeed been struck. Between Karpethes and his wife. As that thought crossed my mind I felt the short hairs at the back of my neck stiffen for a moment. Gooseflesh crawled on my arms. After all, “Nichos” was pretty close to “Necros,” and now this youth thing again. Coincidence, of course. And after all, aren’t all relationships bargains of sorts? Bargains struck for better or for worse.

“But for how long?” I asked. “I mean, how long will it work for you?”

She shrugged. “I have been provided for. And he will have me all the days of his life.”

I coughed, cleared my throat, gave a strained, self-conscious laugh. “And here’s me, the non-pryer!”

“No, not at all, I wanted you to know.”

“Well,” I shrugged, “—but it’s been a pretty deep first conversation.”

“First? Did you believe that buying me a drink would entitle you to more than one conversation?”

I almost winced. “Actually, I—”

But then she smiled and my world lit up. “You did not need to buy the drinks,” she said. “There would have been some other way.”

I looked at her inquiringly. “Some other way to—?”

“To find out if we were English or not.”

“Oh!”

“Here comes Nichos now,” she smiled across the room. “And we must be leaving. He’s not well. Tell me, will you be on the beach tomorrow?”

“Oh—yes!” I answered after a moment’s hesitation. “I like to swim.”

“So do I. Perhaps we can swim out to the raft . . .?”

“I’d like that very much.”

Her husband arrived back at the table under his own steam. He looked a little stronger now, not quite so shriveled somehow. He did not sit but gripped the back of his chair with parchment fingers, knuckles white where the skin stretched over old bones. “Mr. Collins,” he rustled, “—Adrienne, I’m sorry . . .”

“There’s really no need,” I said, rising.

“We really must be going.” She also stood. “No, you stay here, er, Peter? It’s kind of you, but we can manage. Perhaps we’ll see you on the beach.” And she helped him to the door of the bar and through it without once looking back.

## III

They weren't staying at my hotel, had simply dropped in for a drink. That was understandable (though I would have preferred to think that she had been looking for me) for *my* hotel was middling tourist-class while theirs was something else. They were up on the hill, high on the crest of a Ligurian spur where a smaller, much more exclusive place nested in Mediterranean pines. A place whose lights spelled money when they shone up there at night, whose music came floating down from a tiny open-air disco like the laughter of high-living elementals of the air. If I was poetic it was because of her. I mean, that beautiful girl and that weary, wrinkled dried up walnut of an old man. If anything I was sorry for him. And yet in another way I wasn't.

And let's make no pretense about it—if I haven't said it already, let me say it right now—I wanted her. Moreover, there had been that about our conversation, her beach invitation, which told me that she was available.

The thought of it kept me awake half the night. . . .

I was on the beach at 9:00 a.m.—they didn't show until 11:00. When they did, and when she came out of her tiny changing cubicle—

There wasn't a male head on the beach that didn't turn at least twice. Who could blame them? That girl, in *that* costume, would have turned the head of a sphynx. But—there was something, some little nagging thing, different about her. A maturity beyond her years? She held herself like a model, a princess. But who was it for? Karpethes or me?

As for the old man: he was in a crumpled lightweight summer suit and sunshade hat as usual, but he seemed a bit more perky this morning. Unlike myself he'd doubtless had a good night's sleep. While his wife had been changing he had made his way unsteadily across the pebbly beach to my table and sun umbrella, taking the seat directly opposite me; and before his wife could appear he had opened with:

"Good morning, Mr. Collins."

"Good morning," I answered. "Please call me Peter."

"Peter, then," he nodded. He seemed out of breath, either from his stumbling walk over the beach or a certain urgency which I could detect in his movements, his hurried, almost rude "let's get down to it" manner.

"Peter, you said you would be here for one more day?"

"That's right," I answered, for the first time studying him closely where he sat like some strange garden gnome half in the shade of the beach umbrella. "This is my last day."

He was a bundle of dry wood, a pallid prune, a small, umber scarecrow. And his voice, too, was of straw, or autumn leaves blown across a shady path. Only his eyes were alive. "And you said you have no family, few friends, no one to miss you back in England?"

Warning bells rang in my head. Maybe it wasn't so much urgency in him—which usually implies a goal or ambition still to be realized—but eagerness in that the goal was in sight. "That's correct. I am, was, a student doctor. When I get home I shall seek a position. Other than that there's nothing, no one, no ties."

He leaned forward, bird eyes very bright, claw hand reaching across the table, trembling, and—

Her shadow suddenly fell across us as she stood there in that costume. Karpethes jerked back in his chair. His face was working, strange emotions twisting the folds and wrinkles of his flesh into stranger contours. I could feel my heart thumping against my ribs . . . why I couldn't say. I calmed myself, looked up at her and smiled.

She stood with her back to the sun, which made a dark silhouette of her head and face. But in that blot of darkness her oval eyes were green jewels. "Shall we swim, Peter?"

She turned and ran down the beach, and of course I ran after her. She had a head start and beat me to the water, beat me to the raft, too. It wasn't until I hauled myself up beside her that I thought of Karpethes: how I hadn't even excused myself before plunging after her. But at least the water had cleared my head, bringing me completely awake and aware.

Aware of her incredible body where it stretched, almost touching mine, on the fiber deck of the gently bobbing raft.

I mentioned her husband's line of inquiry, gasping a little for breath as I recovered from the frantic exercise of our race. She, on the other hand, already seemed completely recovered. She carefully arranged her hair about her shoulders like a fan, to dry in the sunlight, before answering.

"Nichos is not really my husband," she finally said, not looking at me. "I am his companion, that's all. I could have told you last night, but . . . there was the chance that you really were curious only about our nationality. As for any veiled threats he might have issued: that is not unusual. He might not have the vitality of younger men, but jealousy is ageless."

"No," I answered, "he didn't threaten—not that I noticed. But jealousy? Knowing I have only one more day to spend here, what has he to fear from me?"



Her shoulders twitched a little, a shrug. She turned her face to me, her lips inches away. Her eyelashes were like silken shutters over green pools, hiding whatever swam in the deeps. "I am young, Peter, and so are you. And you are very attractive, very . . . eager? Holiday romances are not uncommon."

My blood was on fire. "I have very little money," I said. "We are staying at different hotels. He already suspects me. It is impossible."

"What is?" she innocently asked, leaving me at a complete loss.

But then she laughed, tossed back her hair, already dry, dangled her hands and arms in the water. "Where there's a will . . ." she said.

"You know that I want you—" The words spilled out before I could control or change them.

"Oh, yes. And I want you." She said it so simply, and yet suddenly I felt seared. A moth brushing the magnet candle's flame.

I lifted my head, looked toward the beach. Across seventy-five yards of sparkling water the beach umbrellas looked very large and close. Karpethes sat in the shade just as I had last seen him, his face hidden in shadow. But I knew that he watched.

"You can do nothing here," she said, her voice languid—but I noticed now that she, too, seemed short of breath.

"This," I told her with a groan, "is going to kill me!"

She laughed, laughter that sparkled more than the sun on the sea. "I'm sorry," she sobered. "It's unfair of me to laugh. But—your case is not hopeless."

"Oh?"

"Tomorrow morning, early. Nichos has an appointment with a specialist in Genova. I am to drive him into the city tonight. We'll stay at a hotel overnight."

I groaned my misery. "Then my case *is* quite hopeless. I fly tomorrow."

"But if I sprained my wrist," she said, "and so could not drive . . . and if he went into Genova by taxi while I stayed behind with a headache—because of the pain from my wrist—" Like a flash she was on her feet, the raft tilting, her body diving, striking the water into a spray of diamonds.

Seconds for it all to sink in—and then I was following her, laboring through the water in her churning wake. And as she splashed from the sea, seeing her stumble, go to her hands and knees in Ligurian shingle—and the pained look on her face, the way she held her wrist as she came to her feet. As easy as that!

Karpethes, struggling to rise from his seat, stared at her with his mouth

agape. Her face screwed up now as I followed her up the beach. And Adrienne holding her “sprained” wrist and shaking it, her mouth forming an elongated “O.” The sinuous motion of her body and limbs, mobile marble with dew of ocean clinging saltily. . . .

If the tiny man had said to me: “I am Necros. I want ten years of your life for one night with her,” at that moment I might have sealed the bargain. Gladly. But legends are legends and he wasn’t Necros, and he didn’t, and I didn’t. After all, there was no need. . . .

#### IV

I suppose my greatest fear was that she might be “having me on,” amusing herself at my expense. She was, of course, “safe” with me—insofar as I would be gone tomorrow and the “romance” forgotten, for her, anyway—and I could also see how she was starved for young companionship, a fact she had brought right out in the open from the word go.

But why me? Why should I be so lucky?

Attractive? Was I? I had never thought so. Perhaps it was because I was so safe: here today and gone tomorrow, with little or no chance of complications. Yes, that must be it. *If* she wasn’t simply making a fool of me. She might be just a tease—

—But she wasn’t.

At 8:30 that evening I was in the bar of my hotel—had been there for an hour, careful not to drink too much, unable to eat—when the waiter came to me and said there was a call for me on the reception telephone. I hurried out to reception where the clerk discreetly excused himself and left me alone.

“Peter?” Her voice was a deep well of promise. “He’s gone. I’ve booked us a table, to dine at 9:00. Is that all right for you?”

“A table? Where?” my own voice breathless.

“Why, up here, of course! Oh, don’t worry, it’s perfectly safe. And anyway, Nichos knows.”

“Knows?” I was taken aback, a little panicked. “What does he know?”

“That we’re dining together. In fact he suggested it. He didn’t want me to eat alone—and since this is your last night . . .”

“I’ll get a taxi right away,” I told her.

“Good. I look forward to . . . seeing you. I shall be in the bar.”

I replaced the telephone in its cradle, wondering if she always took an *aperitif* before the main course. . . .

I had smartened myself up. That is to say, I was immaculate. Black

bow tie, white evening jacket (courtesy of C & A), black trousers and a lightly-frilled white shirt, the only one I had ever owned. But I might have known that my appearance would never match up to hers. It seemed that everything she did was just perfectly right. I could only hope that that meant literally everything.

But in her black lace evening gown with its plunging neckline, short wide sleeves and delicate silver embroidery, she was stunning. Sitting with her in the bar, sipping our drinks—for me a large whiskey and for her a tall Cinzano—I couldn't take my eyes off her. Twice I reached out for her hand and twice she drew back from me.

"Discreet they may well be," she said, letting her oval green eyes flicker toward the bar, where guests stood and chatted, and back to me, "but there's really no need to give them occasion to gossip."

"I'm sorry, Adrienne," I told her, my voice husky and close to trembling, "but—"

"How is it," she demurely cut me off, "that a good-looking man like you is—how do you say it?—going short?"

I sat back, chuckled. "That's a rather unladylike expression," I told her.

"Oh? And what I've planned for tonight is ladylike?"

My voice went huskier still. "Just what is your plan?"

"While we eat," she answered, her voice low, "I shall tell you." At which point a waiter loomed, towel over his arm, inviting us to accompany him to the dining room.

Adrienne's portions were tiny, mine huge. She sipped a slender, light white wine, I gulped blocky rich red from a glass the waiter couldn't seem to leave alone. Mercifully I was hungry—I hadn't eaten all day—else that meal must surely have bloated me out. And all of it ordered in advance, the very best in quality cuisine.

"This," she eventually said, handing me her key, "fits the door of our suite." We were sitting back, enjoying liqueurs and cigarettes. "The rooms are on the ground floor. Tonight you enter through the door, tomorrow morning you leave via the window. A slow walk down to the seafront will refresh you. How is that for a plan?"

"Unbelievable!"

"You don't believe it?"

"Not my good fortune, no."

"Shall we say that we both have our needs?"

"I think," I said, "that I may be falling in love with you. What if I don't wish to leave in the morning?"

She shrugged, smiled, said: "Who knows what tomorrow may bring?"

How could I ever have thought of her simply as another girl? Or even an ordinary young woman? Girl she certainly was, woman, too, but so . . . *knowing!* Beautiful as a princess and knowing as a whore.

If Mario's old myths and legends were reality, and if Nichos Karpethes were really Necros, then he'd surely picked the right companion. No man born could ever have resisted Adrienne, of that I was quite certain. These thoughts were in my mind—but dimly, at the back of my mind—as I left her smoking in the dining room and followed her directions to the suite of rooms at the rear of the hotel. In the front of my mind were other thoughts, much more vivid and completely erotic.

I found the suite, entered, left the door slightly ajar behind me.

The thing about an Italian room is its size. An entire suite of rooms is vast. As it happened I was only interested in one room, and Adrienne had obligingly left the door to that one open.

I was sweating. And yet . . . I shivered.

Adrienne had said fifteen minutes, time enough for her to smoke another cigarette and finish her drink. Then she would come to me. By now the entire staff of the hotel probably knew I was in here, but this was Italy.

## V

I shivered again. Excitement? Probably.

I threw off my clothes, found my way to the bathroom, took the quickest shower of my life. Drying myself off, I padded back to the bedroom.

Between the main bedroom and the bathroom a smaller door stood ajar. I froze as I reached it, my senses suddenly alert, my ears seeming to stretch themselves into vast receivers to pick up any slightest sound. For there had been a sound, I was sure of it, from that room. . . .

A scratching? A rustle? A whisper? I couldn't say. But a sound, anyway.

Adrienne would be coming soon. Standing outside that door I slowly recommenced toweling myself dry. My naked feet were still firmly rooted, but my hands automatically worked with the towel. It was nerves, only nerves. There had been no sound, or at worst only the night breeze off the sea, whispering in through an open window.

I stopped toweling, took another step toward the main bedroom, heard the sound again. A small, choking rasp. A tiny gasping for air.

Karpethes? What the hell was going on?

I shivered violently, my suddenly chill flesh shuddering in an uncon-

trollable spasm. But . . . I forced myself to action, returned to the main bedroom, quickly dressed (with the exceptions of my tie and jacket) and crept back to the small room.

Adrienne must be on her way to me even now. She mustn't find me poking my nose into things, like a suspicious kid. I must kill off this silly feeling that had my skin crawling. Not that an attack of nerves was unnatural in the circumstances, on the contrary, but I wasn't about to let it spoil the night. I pushed open the door of the room, entered into darkness, found the lightswitch. Then—

—I held my breath, flipped the switch.

The room was only half as big as the others. It contained a small single bed, a bedside table, a wardrobe. Nothing more, or at least nothing immediately apparent to my wildly darting eyes. My heart, which was racing, slowed and began to settle toward a steadier beat. The window was open, external shutters closed—but small night sounds were finding their way in through the louvres. The distant sounds of traffic, the toot of horns—holiday sounds from below.

I breathed deeply and gratefully, and saw something projecting from beneath the pillow on the bed. A corner of card or of dark leather, like a wallet or—

—Or a passport!

A Greek passport, Karpethes', when I opened it. But how could it be? The man in the photograph was young, no older than me. His birthdate proved it. And there was his name: Nichos Karpethes. Printed in Greek, of course, but still plain enough. His son?

Puzzling over the passport had served to distract me. My nerves had steadied up. I tossed the passport down, frowned at it where it lay upon the bed, breathed deeply once more . . . and froze solid!

A scratching, a hissing, a dry grunting—from the wardrobe.

Mice? Or did I in fact smell a rat?

Even as the short hairs bristled on the back of my neck I knew anger. There were too many unexplained things here. Too much I didn't understand. And what was it I feared? Old Mario's myths and legends? No, for in my experience the Italians are notorious for getting things wrong. Oh, yes, notorious . . .

I reached out, turned the wardrobe's doorknob, yanked the doors open.

At first I saw nothing of any importance or significance. My eyes didn't know what they sought. Shoes, patent leather, two pairs, stood side by side below. Tiny suits, no bigger than boys' sizes, hung above on steel hangers. And—my God, my God—a waistcoat!

I backed out of that little room on rubber legs, with the silence of the suite shrieking all about me, my eyes bugging, my jaw hanging slack—  
“Peter?”

She came in through the suite’s main door, came floating toward me, eager, smiling, her green eyes glazing. Then blazing their suspicion, their anger as they saw my condition. “Peter!”

I lurched away as her hands reached for me, those hands I had never yet touched, which had never touched me. Then I was into the main bedroom, snatching my tie and jacket from the bed, (don’t ask me why!) and out of the window, yelling some inarticulate, choking thing at her and lashing out frenziedly with my foot as she reached after me. Her eyes were bubbling green hells. “Peter!”

Her fingers closed on my forearm, bands of steel containing a fierce, hungry heat. And strong as two men she began to lift me back into her lair!

I put my feet against the wall, kicked, came free and crashed backward into shrubbery. Then up on my feet, gasping for air, running, tumbling, crashing into the night, down madly tilting slopes, through black chasms of mountain pine with the Mediterranean stars winking overhead, and the beckoning, friendly lights of the village seen occasionally below . . .

In the morning, looking up at the way I had descended and remembering the nightmare of my panic-flight, I counted myself lucky to have survived it. The place was precipitous. In the end I *had* fallen, but only for a short distance. All in utter darkness, and my head striking something hard. But . . .

I did survive. Survived both Adrienne and my flight from her.

And waking with the dawn, and gently fingering my bruises and the massive bump on my forehead, I made my staggering way back to my still slumbering hotel, let myself in and *locked* myself in my room—then sat there trembling and moaning until it was time for the coach.

Weak? Maybe I was, maybe I am.

But on my way into Genova, with people round me and the sun hot through the coach’s windows, I could think again. I could roll up my sleeve and examine that claw mark of four slim fingers and a thumb, branded white into my suntanned flesh, where hair would never more grow on skin sere and wrinkled.

And seeing those marks I could also remember the wardrobe and the waistcoat—and what the waistcoat contained.

That tiny puppet of a man, alive still but barely, his stick-arms dangling through the waistcoat’s armholes, his baby’s head projecting, its chin supported by the tightly buttoned waistcoat’s breast. And the large

bulldog clip over the hanger's bar, its teeth fastened in the loose, wrinkled skin of his walnut head, holding it up. And his skinny little legs dangling, twig-things twitching there; and his pleading, pleading eyes!

But eyes are something I mustn't dwell upon.

And green is a color I can no longer bear. . . .

## Tattoos

### Jack Dann

*Born in Johnson City, New York on February 15, 1945, Jack Dann is the author or editor of twenty-one books to date, including the novels Junction, Starhiker, The Man Who Melted, and the forthcoming mainstream novel, Counting Coup. His short stories have appeared in Omni, Playboy, Penthouse, and most of the leading science fiction magazines and anthologies. As an editor, his anthologies include Wandering Stars, More Wandering Stars, Immortal, and (with Gardner Dozois) a series of fantasy anthologies with zippy one-word titles like Unicorns! and Magicats!.*

*Jack Dann currently lives in Binghamton, New York—the same town where horror editor/publisher Stuart David Schiff lives, and perhaps this influence is responsible for Dann's occasional forays into horror fiction. Dann's latest projects include an anthology of Vietnam stories entitled In Fields of Fire (edited with Jeanne Van Buren Dann), two more fantasy anthologies (edited with Gardner Dozois), and a historical fantasy novel about Leonardo da Vinci, Da Vinci Airborn.*

*We are never like the angels till our passion dies.  
—Decker*

FOR THE PAST few years we'd been going to a small fair, which wasn't really much more than a road show, in Trout Creek, a small village near Walton in upstate New York. The fair was always held in late September when the nights were chilly and the leaves had turned red and orange and dandelion yellow.

We were in the foothills of the Catskills. We drove past the Cannonsville Reservoir, which provides drinking water for New York City. My wife Laura remarked that this was as close to dry as she'd ever seen the reservoir; she had grown up in this part of the country and knew it intimately. My son Ben, who is fourteen, didn't seem to notice anything.



He was listening to hard rock music through the headphones of his portable radio-cassette player.

Then we were on the fairgrounds, driving through a field of parked cars. Ben had the headphones off and was excited. I felt a surge of freedom and happiness. I wanted to ride the rides and lose myself in the arcades and exhibitions; I wanted crowds and the noise and smells of the midway. I wanted to forget my job and my recent heart attack.

We met Laura's family in the church tent. Then Laura and her Mom and sister went to look at saddles, for her sister showed horses, and Dad and Ben and I walked in the other direction.

As we walked past concession stands and through the arcade of shooting galleries, antique wooden horse race games, slots, and topple-the-milk-bottle games, hawkers shouted and gesticulated at us. We waited for Ben to lose his change at the shooting gallery and the loop-toss where all the spindles floated on water; and we went into the funhouse, which was mostly blind alleys and a few tarnished distorting mirrors. Then we walked by the tents of the freak-show: the Palace of Wonders with the original Lobster Man, Velda the Half-Lady, and "The Most Unusual Case in Medical History: Babies Born Chest to Chest."

"Come on," Dad said, "let's go inside and see the freaks."

"Nah," I said. "Places like this depress me. I don't feel right about staring at those people."

"That's how they make their money," Dad said. "Keeps 'em off social services."

I wasn't going to get into *that* with him.

"Well, then Bennie and me'll go in," Dad said. "If that's all right with you."

It wasn't, but I wasn't going to argue, so I reached into my pocket to give Ben some money, but Dad just shook his head and paid the woman sitting in a chair outside the tent. She gave him two tickets. "I'll meet you back here in about ten minutes," I said, glad to get away by myself.

I walked through the crowds, enjoying the rattle and shake of the concessionaires, all trying to grab a buck, the filthy, but brightly painted oil canvas, the sweet smell of cotton candy, the peppery smell of potatoes frying, and the coarse shouting of the kids. I bought some french fries, which were all the more delicious because I wasn't allowed to have them. Two young girls smiled and giggled as they passed me. Goddamn if this wasn't like being sixteen again.

Then something caught my eye.

I saw a group that looked completely out of place. Bikers, punkers, and well-dressed, yuppy-looking types were standing around a tattoo

parlor talking. The long-haired bikers flaunted their tattoos by wearing cut-off jeans jackets to expose their arms and chest; the women who rode with them had taken off their jackets and had delicate tattoo wristlets and red and orange butterflies and flowers worked into their arms or between their breasts. In contrast, most of the yuppies, whom I assumed to be from the city, wore long-sleeved shirts or tailored jackets, including the women, who looked like they had just walked out of a New England clothes catalogue. There was also a stout woman who looked to be in her seventies. She had gray hair pulled back into a tight bun and she wore a dark pleated dress. I couldn't help but think that she should be home in some Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn, sitting with friends in front of her apartment building, instead of standing here in the dust before a tattoo parlor.

I was transfixed. What had brought all these people here to the boonies? Who the hell knew, maybe they were all from here. But I couldn't believe that for a minute. And I wondered if they were *all* tattooed.

I walked over to them to hear snatches of conversation and to investigate the tattoo parlor, which wasn't a tent, as were most of the other concessions, but a small, modern mobile home with the words TAROT TATTOO STUDIO—ORIGINAL DESIGNS, EXPERT COVER-UPS painted across the side in large letters with red serifs through the stems. Then the door opened, and a heavy-set man with a bald head and a full black beard walked out. Everyone, including the yuppies, were admiring him. His entire head was tattooed in Japanese design of a flaming dragon; the dragon's head was high on his forehead, and a stream of flame reached down to the bridge of his nose. The dragon was beautifully executed. How the hell could someone disfigure his face like that? I wondered.

Behind the dragon man was a man of about five feet-six wearing a clean, but bloodied, white tee-shirt. He had brown curly hair, which was long overdue to be cut, a rather large nose, and a full mouth. He looked familiar, very familiar, yet I couldn't place him. This man was emaciated, as if he had given up nourishment for some cultish religious reason. Even his long, well-formed hands looked skeletal, the veins standing out like blue tattoos.

Then I remembered. He looked like Nathan Rivlin, an artist I had not seen in several years. A dear friend I had lost touch with. This man looked like Nathan, but he looked all wrong. I remembered Nathan as filled-out and full of life, an orthodox Jew who wouldn't answer the phone on Shabbes—from Friday night until sundown on Saturday, a man who

loved to stay up all night and talk and drink beer and smoke strong cigars. His wife's name was Ruth, and she was a highly-paid medical textbook illustrator. They had both lived in Israel for some time, and came from Chicago. But the man standing before me was ethereal-looking, as if he were made out of ectoplasm instead of flesh and blood. God forbid he should be Nathan Rivlin.

Yet I couldn't keep myself from shouting, "Nate? Nate, is it you?"

He looked around, and when he saw me, a pained grin passed across his face. I stepped toward him through the crowd. Several other people were trying to gain Nathan's attention. A woman told me to wait my turn, and a few nasty stares and comments were directed at me. I ignored them. "What the hell is all this?" I asked Nathan after we embraced.

"What should it be, it's a business," he said. Just then he seemed like the old Nathan I remembered. He had an impish face, a mobile face capable of great expression.

"Not what I'd expect, though," I said. I could see that his arms and neck were scarred; tiny whitish welts crisscrossed his shaved skin. Perhaps he had some sort of a skin rash, I told myself, but that didn't seem right to me. I was certain that Nathan had deliberately made those hairline scars. But why . . . ? "Nate, what the hell happened to you?" I asked. "You just disappeared off the face of the earth. And Ruth too. How is Ruth?"

Nathan looked away from me, as if I had opened a recent wound. The stout, older woman who was standing a few feet away from us tried to get Nathan's attention. "Excuse me, but could I *please* talk to you?" she asked, a trace of foreign accent in her voice. "It's very important." She looked agitated and tired, and I noticed dark shadows under her eyes. But Nathan didn't seem to hear her. "It's a long story," he said to me, "and I don't think you'd want to hear it." He seemed suddenly cold and distant.

"Of course I would," I insisted.

"Excuse me, please," interrupted the older woman. "I've come a long way to see you," she said to Nathan, "and you've been talking to everyone else but me. And I've been waiting. . . ."

Nathan tried to ignore her, but she stepped right up to him and took his arm. He jerked away, as if he'd been shocked. I saw the faded, tattooed numbers just above her wrist. "Please . . ." she asked.

"Are you here for a cover-up?" Nathan asked her, glancing down at her arm.

"No," she said. "It wouldn't do any good."

"You shouldn't be here," Nathan said gently. "You should be home."

"I know you can help me."

Nathan nodded, as if accepting the inevitable. "I'll talk to you for a moment, but that's all," he said to her. "That's all." Then he looked up at me, smiled wanly, and led the woman into his trailer.

"You thinkin' about getting a tattoo?" Dad asked, catching me staring at the trailer. Ben was looking around at the punkers, sizing them up. He had persuaded his mother to let him have a 'rat-tail' when he went for his last haircut. It was just a small clump of hair that hung down in the back, but it gave him the appearance of rebelliousness; the real thing would be here soon enough. He turned his back to the punkers with their orange hair and long bleach-white rat-tails, probably to exhibit his own.

"Nah, just waiting for you," I said, lying, trying to ignore my feelings of loss and depression. Seeing Nathan had unnerved me. I felt old, as if Nathan's wasting had become my own.

We spend the rest of the day at the fair, had dinner at Mom and Dad's, watched television, and left at about eleven o'clock. We were all exhausted. I hadn't said anything to Laura about seeing Nathan. I knew she would want to see him, and I didn't want her upset, at least that's what I told myself.

Ben fell asleep in the back seat. Laura watched out for deer while I drove, as my night-vision is poor. She should be the one to drive, but it hurts her legs to sit—she has arthritis. Most of the time her legs are stretched out as far as possible in the foot well or she'll prop her feet against the dashboard. I fought the numbing hypnosis of the road. Every mile felt like ten. I kept thinking about Nathan, how he looked, what he had become.

"David, what's the matter?" Laura asked when we were about halfway home. "You're so quiet tonight. Is anything wrong? Did we do anything to upset you?"

"No, I'm just tired," I said, lying. Seeing Nathan had shocked and depressed me. But there was a selfish edge to my feelings. It was as though I had looked in one of the distorting mirrors in the funhouse; I had seen something of myself in Nathan.

Ben yelped, lurching out of a particularly bad nightmare. He leaned forward, hugging the back of the front seat, and asked us if we were home yet.

"We've got a way to go," I said. "Sit back, you'll fall asleep."

"I'm cold back here."

I turned up the heat; the temperature had dropped at least fifteen

degrees since the afternoon. "The freak show probably gave you nightmares; it always did me."

"That's not it," Ben insisted.

"I don't know what's wrong with your grandfather," Laura said. "He had no business taking you in there. He should have his head examined."

"I told you," Ben said, "it had nothing to do with that."

"You want to talk about it?" I asked.

"No," Ben said, but he didn't sit back in his seat; he kept his face just behind us.

"You should sit back," Laura said. "If we got into an accident—"

"Okay," Ben said. There was silence for a minute, and then he said, "You know who I dreamed about?"

"Who?" I asked.

"Uncle Nathan."

I straightened up, automatically looking into the rearview mirror to see Ben, but it was too dark. I felt a chill and turned up the heat another notch.

"We haven't seen him in about four years," Laura said. "Whatever made you dream about him?"

"I dunno," Ben said. "But I dreamed he was all different colors, all painted, like a monster."

I felt the hairs on the back of my neck prickle.

"You were dreaming about the freak show," Laura told him. "Sometimes old memories of people we know get mixed up with new memories."

"It wasn't just Uncle Nathan looking like that scared me."

"What was it?" I asked.

He pulled himself toward us again. But he spoke to Laura. "He was doing something to Dad," Ben said, meaning me.

"What was he doing?" Laura asked.

"I dunno," Ben said, "but it was horrible, like he was pulling out Dad's heart or something."

"Jesus Christ," Laura said. "Look, honey, it was only a dream," she said to him. "Forget about it and try to go back to sleep."

I tried to visualize the lines on Nathan's arms and neck and keep the car on the road.

I knew I had to go back and see him.

Monday morning I finished an overdue fund-raising report for the Binghamton Symphony with the help of my secretary. The three o'clock meeting with the board of directors went well; I was congratulated for

a job well done, and my future seemed secure for another six months. I called Laura, told her I had another meeting, and that I would be home later than usual. Laura had a deadline of her own—she was writing an article for a travel magazine—and was happy for the stretch of work-time. She was only going to send out for a pizza anyway.

The drive to the fairgrounds seemed to take longer than usual, but that was probably because I was impatient and tense about seeing Nathan. Ben's crazy dream had spooked me; I also felt guilty about lying to Laura. We had a thing about not lying to each other, although there were some things we didn't talk about, radioactive spots from the past which still burned, but which we pretended were dead.

There weren't as many people on the fairgrounds as last night, but that was to be expected, and I was glad for it.

I parked close to the arcades, walked through the huckster's alley and came to Nathan Rivlin's trailer. It was dusk, and there was a chill in the air—a harbinger of the hard winter that was to come. A few kids wearing army jackets were loitering, looking at the designs of tattoos on paper, called flash, which were displayed under plexiglass on a table secured to the trailer. The designs were nicely executed, but ordinary stuff to attract the passers-by: anchors, hearts, butterflies, stylized women in profile, eagles, dragons, stars, various military insignia, cartoon characters, death-heads, flags, black panthers and lions, snakes, spiders; nothing to indicate the kind of fine work that had been sported by the people hanging around the trailer yesterday.

I knocked on the door. Nathan didn't seem surprised to see me; he welcomed me inside. It was warm inside the trailer, close, and Nathan was wearing a sixties hippy-style white gauze shirt; the sleeves were long and the cuffs buttoned, hiding the scars I had seen on his arms yesterday. Once again I felt a shock at seeing him so gaunt, at seeing the webbed scars on his neck. Was I returning to my friend's out of just a morbid fascination to see what he had become? I felt guilty and ashamed. Why hadn't I sought out Nathan before this? If I had been a better friend, I probably would have.

Walking into his studio was like stepping into his paintings, which covered most of the available wall space. Nathan was known for working on large canvases, and some of his best work was in here—paintings I had seen in process years ago. On the wall opposite the door was a painting of a nude man weaving a cat's cradle. The light was directed from behind, highlighting shoulders and arms and the large, peasant hands. The features of the face were blurred, but unmistakably Nathan's. Beside it was a huge painting of three circus people, two jugglers standing

beside a woman. Behind them, in large red letters was the word CIRCUS. The faces were ordinary, and disturbing, perhaps because of that. There was another painting on the wall where Nathan had set up his tattoo studio. A self-portrait. Nathan wearing a blue worker's hat, red shirt, and apron, and standing beside a laboratory skeleton. And there were many paintings I had never seen, a whole series of tattoo paintings, which at first glance looked to be nonrepresentational, until the designs of figures on flesh came into focus. There were several paintings of gypsies. One, in particular, seemed to be staring directly at me over tarot cards, which were laid out on a table strewn with glasses. There was another painting of an old man being carried from his death-bed by a sad-faced demon. Nathan had a luminous technique, an execution like that of the old masters. Between the paintings, and covering every available space, was flash; not the flash that I had seen outside, but detailed colored design and drawings of men and animals and mythical beasts, as grotesque as anything by Goya. I was staring into my own nightmares.

The bluish light that comes just before dark suffused the trailer, and the shadows seemed to become more concrete than the walls or paintings.

The older woman I had seen on Sunday was back. She was sitting in Nathan's studio, in what looked like a variation of a dentist's chair. Beside the chair was a cabinet and a sink with a high, elongated faucet, the kind usually seen in examination rooms. Pigments, dyes, paper towels, napkins, bandages, charcoal for stencils, needle tubes and bottles of soap and alcohol were neatly displayed beside an autoclave. I was surprised to see this woman in the chair, even though I knew she had been desperate to see Nathan. But she just didn't seem the sort to be getting a tattoo, although that probably didn't mean a thing: anyone could have hidden tattoos: old ladies, senators, presidents. Didn't Barry Goldwater brag that he had two dots tattooed on his hand to represent the bite of a snake? Who the hell knew why.

"I'll be done in a few minutes," Nathan said to me. "Sit down. Would you like a drink? I've got some beer, I think. If you're hungry, I've got soup on the stove." Nathan was a vegetarian; he always used to make the same miso soup, which he'd start when he got up in the morning, every morning.

"If you don't mind, I'll just sit," I said, and I sat down on an old green art deco couch. The living room was made up of the couch, two slat back chairs, and a television set on a battered oak desk. The kitchenette behind Nathan's work area had a stove, a small refrigerator, and a table attached

to the wall. And, indeed, I could smell the familiar aroma of Nathan's soup.

"Steve, this is Mrs. Stramm," Nathan said, and he seemed to be drawn toward me, away from Mrs. Stramm, who looked nervous. I wanted to talk with him . . . connect with him . . . find the man I used to know.

"Mister Tarot," the woman said, "I'm ready now, you can go ahead."

Nathan sat down in the chair beside her and switched on a gooseneck adjustable lamp, which produced a strong, intense white light. The flash and paintings in the room lost their fire and brilliance, as the darkness in the trailer seemed to gain substance.

"Do you think you can help me?" she asked. "Do you think it will work?"

"If you wish to believe in it," Nathan said. He picked up his electrical tattoo machine, examined it, and then examined her wrist, where the concentration camp tattoo had faded into seven smudgy blue marks.

"You know, when I got these numbers at the camp, it was a doctor who put them on. He was a prisoner, like I was. He didn't have a machine like yours. He worked for Dr. Mengele." She looked away from Nathan while she spoke, just as many people look away from a nurse about to stick a needle in their vein. But she seemed to have a need to talk. Perhaps it was just nerves.

Nathan turned on his instrument, which made a staticky, electric noise, and began tattooing her wrist. I watched him work; he didn't seem to have heard a word she said. He looked tense and bit his lip, as if it was his own wrist that was being tattooed. "I knew Mengele," the woman continued. "Do you know who he was?" she asked Nathan. Nathan didn't answer. "Of course you do," she said. "He was such a nice looking man. Kept his hair very neat, clipped his mustache, and he had blue eyes. Like the sky. Everything else in the camp was gray, and the sky would get black from the furnaces, like the world was turned upside down." She continued to talk while Nathan worked. She grimaced from the pain of the tattoo needle.

I tried to imagine what she might have looked like when she was young, when she was in the camp. It would have been Auschwitz, I surmised, if Mengele was there.

But why was a Jew getting a tattoo?

Perhaps she wasn't Jewish.

And then I noticed that Nathan's wrist was bleeding. Tiny beads of blood soaked through his shirt, which was like a blotter.

"Nathan—" I said, as I reflexively stood up.



But Nathan looked at me sharply and shook his head, indicating that I should stay where I was. "It's all right, David. We'll talk about it later."

I sat back down and watched them, mesmerized.

Mrs. Stramm stopped talking; she seemed calmer now. There was only the sound of the machine, and the background noise of the fair. The air seemed heavier in the darkness, almost smothering. "Yesterday you told me that you came here to see me to find out about your husband," Nathan said to her. "You lied to me, didn't you."

"I had to know if he was alive," she said. "He was a strong man, he could have survived. I left messages through the agencies for him when I was in Italy. I couldn't stand to go back to Germany. I thought to go to South America, I had friends in Sao Paulo."

"You came to America to cut yourself off from the past," Nathan said in a low voice. "You knew your husband had died. I can feel that you buried him . . . in your heart. But you couldn't bury everything. The tattoo is changing. Do you want me to stop? I have covered the numbers."

I couldn't see what design he had made. Her wrist was bleeding, though . . . as was his.

Then she began to cry, and suddenly seemed angry. But she was directing her pain and anger at herself. Nathan stopped working, but made no move to comfort her. When Mrs. Stramm's crying subsided and she regained control of her breathing, she said, "I murdered my infant. I had help from another, who thought she was saving my life." She seemed surprised at her own words.

"Do you want me to stop," Nathan asked again, but his voice was gentle.

"You do what you think, you're the tattooist."

Nathan began again. The noise of his machine was teeth-jarring. Mrs. Stramm continued talking to him, even though she still looked away from the machine. But she talked in a low voice now. I had to lean forward and strain to hear her. My eyes were fixed on Nathan's wrist; the dots of blood had connected into a large bright stain on his shirt cuff.

"I was only seventeen," Mrs. Stramm continued. "Just married and pregnant. I had my baby in the camp and Dr. Mengele delivered it himself. It wasn't so bad in the hospital. I was taken care of as if I were in a hospital in Berlin. Everything was nice, clean. I even pretended that what was going on outside the hospital in the camp, in the ovens, wasn't true. When I had the baby—his name was Stefan—everything was perfect. Dr. Mengele was very careful when he cut the cord; and another doctor assisted him, a Jewish doctor from the camp. Ach!" she said, flinching; she looked down at her wrist, where Nathan was working, but

she didn't say a word about the blood soaking through his shirtsleeve. She seemed to accept it as part of the process. Nathan must have told her what to expect. He stopped, and refilled his instrument with another ink pigment.

"But then I was sent to a barracks, which was filthy, but not terribly crowded," she continued. "There were other children in there, mutilated. One set of twins had been sewn together, back to back, arm to arm, and they smelled terrible. They were an experiment, of course. I knew that my baby and I were going to be an experiment. There was a woman in the barracks looking after us. She couldn't do much, but watch the children die. She felt sorry for me. She told me that nothing could be done for my baby. And after they had finished their experiment and killed my son, then I would be killed also; it was the way it was done. Dr. Mengele killed all surviving parents and healthy siblings for comparison. My only hope, she said, was to kill my baby myself. If my baby died 'naturally' before Mengele began his experiment, then he might let me live. I remember thinking to myself that it was the only way I could save my baby the agony of a terrible death at the hands of Mengele.

"So I suffocated my baby. I pinched his nose and held his mouth shut while my friend held us both and cried for us. I remember that very well. Dr. Mengele learned of my baby's death and came to the barracks himself. He said he was very sorry, and, you know, I believed him. I took comfort from the man who had made me kill my child. I should have begged him to kill *me*. But I said nothing."

"What could you have done?" Nathan asked, as he was working. "Your child would have died no matter what. You saved yourself, that's all you could do under the circumstances."

"Is that how *you* would have felt, if you were me?"

"No," Nathan said, and a sad smile appeared for an instant, an inappropriate response, yet somehow telling.

Mrs. Stramm stopped talking and had closed her eyes. It was as if she and Nathan were praying together. I could feel that, and I sensed that something else was happening between them. Something seemed to be passing out of her, a dark, palpable spirit. I could feel its presence in the room. And Nathan looked somehow different, more defined. It was the light from the lamp, no doubt, but some kind of exchange seemed to be taking place. Solid, solid Mrs. Stramm looked softer, as if lighter, while Nathan looked as ravaged as an internee. It was as if he were becoming defined by this woman's past.

When Nathan finished, he put his instrument down on the cabinet, and taped some gauze over his own bleeding wrist. Then he just stared

at his work on Mrs. Stramm. I couldn't see the tattoo from where I was sitting, so I stood up and walked over. "Is it all right if I take a look?" I asked, but neither one answered me . . . neither one seemed to notice me.

The tattoo was beautiful, lifelike in a way I had not thought possible for a marking on the flesh. It was the cherubic face of an angel with thin, curly hair. One of the numbers had now become the shading for the angel's fine, straight nose. Surrounding the face were dark feathered wings that crossed each other; an impossible figure, but a hauntingly sad and beautiful one. The eyes seemed to be looking upward and out, as if contemplating a high station of paradise. The numbers were lost in the blue-blackness of lifting wings. This figure looked familiar, which was not surprising, as Nathan had studied the work of the masters. I remembered a Madonna, which was attributed to the Renaissance artist Lorenzo de Credi, that had two angels with wings such as those on the tattoo. But the tattooed wings were so dark they reminded me of death; and they were bleeding, an incongruous testament to life.

I thought about Nathan's bleeding wrist, and wonder. . . .

"It's beautiful," Mrs. Stramm said, staring at her tattoo. "It's the right face, it's the way his face would have looked . . . had he lived." Then she stood up abruptly. Nathan sat where he was; he looked exhausted, which was how I suddenly felt.

"I must put a gauze wrap over it," Nathan said.

"No, I wish to look at him."

"Can you see the old numbers?" Nathan asked.

"No," she said at first, then, "Yes, I can see them."

"Good," Nathan said.

She stood before Nathan, and I could now see that she had once been beautiful: big-boned, proud, full-bodied, with a strong chin and regal face. Her fine gray hair had probably been blonde, as her eyebrows were light. And she looked relieved, released. I couldn't help but think that she seemed now like a woman who had just given birth. The strain was gone. She no longer seemed gravid with the burden of sorrow. But the heaviness had not disappeared from the room, for I could feel the psychic closeness of grief like stale, humid air. Nathan looked wasted in the sharp, cleansing, focused light.

"Would you mind if I looked at *your* tattoo?" Mrs. Stramm asked.

"I'm sorry," Nathan said.

Mrs. Stramm nodded, then picked up her handbag and took out her checkbook. She moved toward the light and began to scribble out a check. "Will you accept three hundred dollars?"

“No, I cannot. Consider it paid.”

She started to argue, but Nathan turned away from her. “Thank you,” she said, and walked to the door.

Nathan didn’t answer.

Nathan turned on the overhead light; the sudden change from darkness to light unnerved me.

“Tell me what the hell’s going on,” I said. “Why did your wrist start bleeding when you were tattooing that woman?”

“It’s part of the process,” Nathan said vaguely. “Do you want coffee?” he asked, changing the subject—Nathan had a way of talking around any subject, peeling away layers as if conversation was an onion; he eschewed directness. Perhaps it was his rabbinical heritage. At any rate, he wasn’t going to tell me anything until he was ready. I nodded, and he took a bag of ground coffee out of his freezer, and dripped a pot in the Melitta. Someone knocked at the door and demanded a tattoo, and Nathan told him that he would have to wait until tomorrow.

We sat at the table and sipped coffee. I felt an overwhelming lassitude come over me. My shoulder began to ache . . . to throb. I worried that this might be the onset of another heart attack (I try not to pay attention to my hypochondria, but those thoughts still flash through my mind, no matter how rational I try to be). Surely it was muscular, I told myself: I had been wrestling with my son last night. I needed to start swimming again at the “Y.” I was out of shape, and right now I felt more like sixty-two than forty-two. After a while, the coffee cleared my head a bit—it was a very, very strong blend, Pico, I think—but the atmosphere inside the trailer was still oppressive, even with the overhead light turned on. It was as if I could *feel* the shadows.

“I saw Mrs. Stramm here yesterday afternoon,” I said, trying to lead Nathan. “She seems Jewish, strange that she should be getting a tattoo. Although maybe not so strange, since she came to a Jewish tattooist.” I forced a laugh and tried not to stare at the thin webbing of scars on his neck.

“She’s not Jewish,” Nathan said. “Catholic. She was interred in the camp for political reasons. Her family was caught hiding Jews.”

“It seems odd that she’d come to you for a tattoo to cover up her numbers,” I said. “She could have had surgery. You would hardly be able to tell they’d ever been there.”

“That’s not why she came.”

“Nathan. . . .”

“Most of the people just want tattoos,” Nathan said. He seemed slightly

defensive, and then he sighed and said, "But sometimes I get people like Mrs. Stramm. Word gets around, word-of-mouth. Sometimes I can sense things, see things about people when I'm tattooing. It's something like automatic writing, maybe. Then the tattoo takes on a life of its own, and sometimes it changes the person I tattoo."

"This whole thing . . . it seems completely crazy," I said, remembering his paintings, the large canvases of circus people, carny people. He had made his reputation with those melancholy, poignant oil paintings. He had traveled, followed the carnies. Ruth didn't seem to mind. She was independent, and used to travel quite a bit by herself also; she was fond of taking grueling, long day-trips. Like Nathan, she was full of energy. I remember that Nathan had been drawn to tattooing through circus people. He visited tattoo studios, and used them for his settings. The paintings he produced then were haunted, and he became interested in the idea of living art, the relationship of art to society, the numinal, symbolic quality of primitive art. It was only natural that he'd want to try tattooing, which he did. He had even tattooed himself: a tiny raven that seemed to be forever nestled in his palm. But that had been a phase, and once he had had his big New York show, he went on to paint ordinary people in parks and shopping malls and in movie houses, and his paintings were selling at over five thousand dollars apiece. I remembered ribbing him for tattooing himself. I had told him he couldn't be buried in a Jewish cemetery. He had said that he had already bought his plot. Money talks.

"How's Ruth?" I asked, afraid of what he would tell me. He would never be here, he would never look like this, if everything was all right between them.

"She's dead," he whispered, and he took a sip of his coffee.

"What?" I asked, shocked. "How?"

"Cancer, as she was always afraid of."

The pain in my shoulder became worse, and I started to sweat. It seemed to be getting warmer; he must have turned the heat up.

"How could all this happen without Laura or me knowing about it?" I asked. "I just can't believe it."

"Ruth went back to Connecticut to stay with her parents."

"Why?"

"David," Nathan said, "I knew she had cancer, even when she went in for tests and they all turned out negative. I kept dreaming about it, and I could see it burning inside her. I thought I was going crazy . . . I probably was. I couldn't stand it. I couldn't be near her. I couldn't help her. I couldn't do anything. So I started traveling, got back into the tattoo

culture. The paintings were selling, especially the tattoo stuff—I did a lot of close-up work, you wouldn't even know it was tattoos I was painting, I got into some beautiful oriental stuff—so I stayed away.”

“And she died without you?” I asked, incredulous.

“In Stamford. The dreams got worse. It got so I couldn't even talk to her over the phone. I could see what was happening inside her and I was helpless. And I was a coward. I'm paying for it now.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. Goddammit, it was hot.

He didn't answer.

“Tell me about the scars on your neck and your arms.”

“And my chest, everywhere,” Nathan confessed. “They're tattoos. It started when I ran away, when I left Ruth, I started tattooing myself. I used the tattoo gun, but no ink.”

“Why?” I asked.

“At first, I guess I did it as practice, but then it became a sort of punishment. It was painful. I was painting without pigments. I was inflicting my own punishment. Sometimes I can see the tattoos, as if they were paintings. I'm a map of what I've done to my wife, to my family; and then around that time I discovered I could see into other people, and sort of draw their lives differently. Most people I'd just give a tattoo, good work, sometimes even great work, maybe, but every once in a while I'd see something when I was working. I could see if someone was sick, I could see what was wrong with him. I was going the carny route, and living with some gypsy people. A woman, a friend of mine, saw my 'talent'—he laughed when he said that— “and helped me develop it. That's when I started bleeding when I worked. As my friend used to tell me, 'Everything has a price.'”

I looked at Nathan. His life was draining away. He was turning into a ghost, or a shadow. Not even his tattoos had color.

My whole arm was aching. I couldn't ignore it any longer. And it was so close in the trailer that I couldn't *breathe*. “I've got to get some air,” I said as I forced myself to get up. I felt as if I hadn't slept in days. Then I felt a burning in my neck and a stabbing pain in my chest. I tried to shout to Nathan, who was standing up, who looked shocked, who was coming toward me.

But I couldn't move; I was as leaden as a statue.

I could only see Nathan, and it was as if he were lit by a tensor lamp. The pigments of living tattoos glowed under his shirt, and resolved themselves like paintings under a stage scrim. He was a living, radiant landscape of scenes and figures, terrestrial and heavenly and demonic. I could see a grotesque caricature of Mrs. Stramm's tattoo on Nathan's

wrist. It was a howling, tortured, winged child. Most of the other tattoos expressed the ugly, minor sins of people Nathan had tattooed, but there were also figures of Nathan and Ruth. All of Ruth's faces were Madonna-like, but Nathan was rendered perfectly, and terribly; he was a monster portrayed in entirely human terms, a visage of greed and cowardice and hardness. But there was a central tattoo on Nathan's chest that looked like a Durer engraving—such was the sureness and delicacy of the work. Ruth lay upon the ground, amid grasses and plants and flowers, which seemed surreal in their juxtaposition. She had opened her arms, as if begging for Nathan, who was depicted also, to return. Her chest and stomach and neck were bleeding, and one could look into the cavities of the open wounds. And marching away, descending under the nipple of Nathan's chest, was the figure of Nathan. He was followed by cherubs riding fabulous beasts, some of which were the skeletons of horses and dogs and goats with feathery wings . . . wings such as Nathan had tattooed on Mrs. Stramm. But the figure of Nathan was running away. His face, which had always seemed askew—a large nose, deep-set engaging eyes, tousled hair, the combination of features that made him look like a seedy Puck, the very embodiment of generous friendliness—was rendered formally. His nose was straight and long, rather than crooked, as it was in real life, and his eyes were narrow and tilted, rather than wide and roundish; and his mouth, which in real life, even now, was full, was drawn as a mere line. In his hands, Nathan was carrying Ruth's heart and other organs, while a child riding a skeleton Pegasus was waving a thighbone.

The colors were like an explosion, and the tattoos filled my entire field of vision; and then the pain took me, wrapped like a snake around my chest. My heart was pounding. It seemed to be echoing in a huge hall. It was all I could hear. The burning in my chest increased and I felt myself screaming, even if it might be soundless. I felt my entire being straining in fright, and then the colors dimmed. Fainting, falling, I caught one last glimpse of the walls and ceiling, all pulsing, glowing, all coalescing in one grand tattoo, which was all around me, and I followed those ink-pigment paths into grayness and then darkness. I thought of Laura and Ben, and I felt an overwhelming sense of sorrow for Nathan.

For once, I didn't seem to matter, and my sense of rushing sadness became a universe in which I was suspended.

I thought I was dying, but it seemed that it would take an eternity, an eternity to think, to worry back over my life, to relive it once more, but from a higher perspective, from an aerial view. But then I felt a pressure, as if I were under water and a faraway explosion had fomented a stroke

current. I was being pulled away, jostled, and I felt the tearing of pain and saw a bright light and heard an electrical sparking, a sawing. And I saw Nathan's face, as large as a continent gazing down upon me.

I woke up on his couch. My head was pounding, but I was breathing naturally, evenly. My arm and shoulder and chest no longer ached, although I felt a needlelike burning over my heart. Reflexively, I touched the spot where I had felt the tearing pain, and found it had been bandaged. "What the hell's this?" I asked Nathan, who was sitting beside me. Although I could make out the scars on his neck, I could no longer find the outlines of the tattoos I had seen, nor could I make out the brilliant pigments that I had imagined or hallucinated. "Why do I have a bandage on?" I felt panic.

"Do you remember what happened?" he asked. Nathan looked ill. Even more wasted. His face was shiny with sweat. But it wasn't warm in here now; it was comfortable. Yet with Mrs. Stramm was sitting for her tattoo, it was stifling. I had felt the closeness of dead air like claustrophobia.

"Christ, I thought I was having a heart attack. I blacked out. I fell."

"I caught you. You did have a heart attack."

"Then why the hell am I here instead of in a hospital?" I asked, remembering how it felt to be completely helpless in the emergency room, machines whirring and making ticking and just audible beeping noises as they monitored vital signs.

"It could have been very bad," Nathan said, ignoring my question.

"Then what am I doing here?" I asked again. I sat up. This was all wrong. Goddammit, it was wrong. I felt a rush in my head, and the headache became sharp and then withdrew back into dull pain.

"I took care of it," he said.

"How?"

"How do you feel?"

"I have a headache, that's all," I said, "and I want to know what you did on my chest."

"Don't worry, I didn't use pigment. They'll let you into a Jewish cemetery." Nathan smiled.

"I want to know what you did." I started to pull off the gauze, but he stopped me.

"Let it heal for a few days. Change the bandage. That's all."

"And what the hell am I supposed to tell Laura?" I asked.

"That you're alive."

I felt weak, yet it was as if I had sloughed something off, something heavy and deadening.



And I just walked out the door.

After I was outside, shivering, for the weather had turned unseasonably cold, I realized that I had not said goodbye. I had left, as if in a daze. Yet I could not turn around and go back. This whole night was crazy, I told myself. I'd come back tomorrow and apologize . . . and try to find out what had really happened.

I drove home, and it began to snow, a freakish wet, heavy snow that turned everything bluish-white, luminescent.

My chest began to itch under the bandage.

I didn't get home until after twelve. Understandably, Laura was worried and anxious. We both sat down to talk in the upholstered chairs in front of the fireplace in the living room, facing each other; that was where we always sat when we were arguing or working out problems. Normally, we'd sit on the sofa and chat and watch the fire. Laura had a fire crackling in the fireplace; and, as there were only a few small lamps on downstairs, the ruddy light from the fire flickered in our large, white-carpeted living room. Laura wore a robe with large cuffs on the sleeves and her thick black hair was long and shiny, still damp from a shower. Her small face was tight, as she was upset, and she wore her glasses, another give-away that she was going to get to the bottom of this. She almost never wore her glasses, and the lenses were scratched from being tossed here and there and being banged about in various drawers; she only used them when she had to "focus her thoughts."

I looked a sight: my once starched white shirt was wrinkled and grimy, and I smelled rancid, the particular odor of nervous sweat. My trousers were dirty, especially at the knees, where I had fallen to the floor, and I had somehow torn out the hem of my right pantleg.

I told Laura the whole story, what had happened from the time I had seen Nathan Sunday until tonight. At first she seemed relieved that I had been with Nathan—she had never been entirely sure of me, and I'm certain she thought I'd had a rendezvous with some twenty-two year old receptionist or perhaps the woman who played the french horn in the orchestra—I had once made a remark about her to Laura. But she was more upset that I had expected when I told her that Ruth had died. We were friends, certainly, although I was much closer to Nathan than she was to Ruth.

We moved over to the couch and I held her until she stopped crying. I got up, fixed us both a drink, and finished the story.

"How could you let him tattoo your skin?" Laura asked; and then, exposing what she was really thinking about, she said in a whisper, "I

can't believe Ruth's gone. We were good friends, you didn't know that, did you?"

"I guess I didn't." After a pause, I said, "I didn't *let* Nathan tattoo me. I told you, I was unconscious. I'd had an attack or something." I don't know if Laura really believed that. She had been a nurse for fifteen years.

"Well, let me take a look at what's under the gauze."

I let her unbutton my shirt; with one quick motion, she tore the gauze away. Looking down, I just saw the crisscrossings and curlicues and random lines that were thin raised welts over my heart.

"What the hell did he *do* to you? This whole area could get infected. Who knows if his needle was even clean. You could get hepatitis, or AIDS, considering the kinds of people who go in for tattoos."

"No, he kept everything clean," I said.

"Did he have an autoclave?" she asked.

"Yes, I think he did."

Laura went to the downstairs bathroom and came back with betadine and a clean bandage. Her fuzzy blue bathrobe was slightly open, and I felt myself becoming excited. She was a tiny woman, small boned and delicate-featured, yet big-busted, which I liked. When we first lived together, before we married, she was extremely shy in bed, even though she'd already been married before; yet she soon became aggressive, open, and frank, and to my astonishment I found that *I* had grown more conservative.

I touched her breasts as she cleaned the tattoo, or more precisely, the welts, for he used no pigment. The betadine and the touch of her hands felt cool on my chest.

"Can you make anything out of this?" she asked, meaning the marks Nathan had made.

I looked down, but couldn't make anything more out of them than she could. I wanted to look at the marks closely in the mirror, but Laura had become excited, as I was, and we started making love on the couch. She was on top of me, we still had our clothes on, and we were kissing each other so hard that we ground our teeth. I pressed myself inside her. Our lovemaking was urgent and cleansing. It was as if we had recovered something, and I felt my heart beating, clear and strong. After we came and lay locked together, still intimate, she whispered, "Poor Nathan."

I dreamed about him that night. I dreamed of the tattoo I had seen on his chest, the parade of demons and fabulous creatures. I was inside his tattoo, watching him walking off with Ruth's heart. I could hear the demon angels shouting and snarling and waving pieces of bone as they

rode atop unicorns and skeleton dragons flapping canvas-skinned pterodactyl wings. Then Nathan saw me, and he stopped. He looked as skeletal as the creatures around him, as if his life and musculature and fat had been worn away, leaving nothing but bones to be buried.

He smiled at me and gave me Ruth's heart.

It was warm and still beating. I could feel the blood clotting in my hand.

I woke up with a jolt. I was shaking and sweating. Although I had turned up the thermostat before going to bed, it was cold in the bedroom. Laura was turned away from me, moving restlessly, her legs raised toward her chest in a semi-fetal position. All the lights were off, and as it was a moonlit night, the snow reflected a wan light; everything in the room looked shadowy blue. And I felt my heart pumping fast.

I got up and went to the bathroom. Two large dormer windows over the tub to my left let in the dim light of a streetlamp near the southern corner of the house. I looked in the mirror at my chest and could see my tattoo. The lines were etched in blue, as if my body were snow reflecting moonlight. I could see a heart; it was luminescent. I saw an angel wrapped in deathly wings, an angel such as the one Nathan had put on Mrs. Stramm's wrist to heal her; but this angel, who seemed to have some of Nathan's features—his crooked nose and full mouth, had spread his wings, and his perfect infant hands held out Ruth's heart to me.

Staring, I leaned on the white porcelain sink. I felt a surging of life, as if I was being given a gift, and then the living image of the tattoo died. I shivered naked in the cold bathroom. I could feel the chill passing through the ill-fitting storms of the dormer windows. It was as if the chill were passing right through me, as if I had been opened up wide.

And I knew that Nathan was in trouble. The thought came to me like a shock of cold water. But I could *feel* Nathan's presence, and I suddenly felt pain shoot through my chest, concentrated in the tattoo, and then I felt a great sadness, an oceanic grief.

I dressed quickly and drove back to Trout Creek. The fairgrounds were well-lit, but deserted. It had stopped snowing. The lights were on in Nathan's trailer. I knocked on the door, but there was no answer. The door was unlocked, as I had left it, and I walked in.

Nathan was dead on the floor. His shirt was open and his chest was bleeding—he had the same tattoo I did. But his face was calm, his demons finally exorcised. I picked him up, carried him to the couch, and kissed him goodbye.

As I left, I could feel his strength and sadness and love pumping inside me. The wind blew against my face, drying my tears . . . it was the cold fluttering of angel's wings.

## Acquiring A Family

R. Chetwynd-Hayes

*While relatively little known in the United States, R. Chetwynd-Hayes has become a major figure in horror fiction in England over the past two decades. Born in Isleworth, Middlesex on May 30, 1919, Chetwynd-Hayes had his first sale in 1954, but it wasn't until 1971 with his first collection of horror stories, The Unbidden, that he became active within his genre. Very active, indeed. Chetwynd-Hayes has written some twenty-five novels and collections of short stories and has edited another twenty-five horror anthologies—including the 9th through 20th volumes of The Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories. There have been two films based on his work: From Beyond the Grave and The Monster Club. His latest books include Tales from the Shadows, Tales from the Haunted House, and Dracula's Children.*

*As a rule, R. Chetwynd-Hayes works within traditional horror concepts—hauntings, monsters, supernatural powers—although the results are often unexpected twists or just plain twisted. Like Robert Bloch, Chetwynd-Hayes frequently mixes humor and horror together, as anyone who has read or seen The Monster Club will attest. However, I don't think "Acquiring a Family" will leave you laughing.*

CELIA WATSON examined the front of her new house with a critical eye, but could detect nothing lacking. The five windows—three up and two down—gleamed as only freshly cleaned glass can; the red brickwood looked as if it had been washed and sanded in the not too distant past, while frames, guttering and front door glittered with recently applied green paint.

Celia had dreamed of such a house for a long time and it was only the event of an ancient uncle's demise and the acquisition of his money, that had enabled her to buy this one. She was grateful for the late uncle's thoughtfulness in leaving her the wherewithal to enjoy not only this dream house, but sufficient funds to never again have to consider the dire prospect of gainful employment.

She took a large key from her handbag, fitted it into a keyhole, then flung the door open.

The pseudo antique furniture suited the small house, ranging as it did from a credence table and umbrella-cum-hat-stand in the tiny hall, to the looming Tudor-style wardrobe and bed in what might be called the main bedroom. The last owner had decorated all the walls with light brown emulsion paint, and although this served as an excellent background for the furniture, it did have a rather depressing effect when viewed for the first time, but even this Celia managed to ignore. She had seen the interior of the house before of course and agreed to take it as it stood, furniture, decor and all; she hoped she would live there for many years and die contented—if not happy—in the vast Tudor-style bed.

Such is one of the illusions that make up the foundation of that great fantasy we call life.

Celia Watson spoke aloud: "This is what I have always wanted. Thanks to God I am not too old to enjoy it."

She was fifty-three, an age that has escaped from the chains of youth, but has not yet slid into the iron cage of old age. At such a time of life one should be in a position to benefit from experience, while still enjoying clear mental powers and—hopefully—good health.

Celia enjoyed both.

But she was alone. A strange distaste for any form of close intimacy with persons of either sex, resulted in her never marrying, or as for that matter encouraging anything more than superficial friendships, so that now—while still enjoying her own company—there was a fear-germ—a nagging thought—that she might have missed out on something essential to her well-being.

She swept, brushed, polished, arranged pictures and knick-knacks to her satisfaction, then manhandled heavy furniture from one place to another. But the time came when all that could be done was done and the bright hues of novelty died; then the fear-germ returned, a little larger, stronger than before.

Alien thoughts chased each other down the rarely explored avenues of the brain and eventually congregated into a ridiculous notion:

She should have had children.

Before moving into the cottage she would have laughed such an idea to scorn, for had she not ridiculed the premise that a woman's primary role was that of mother? "In this over-crowded planet," she often maintained, "I at least have not made the situation worse by brat production. Pity there's not a few more like me."

Now, while seated on a well padded chair, she would splutter up from

a shallow sleep, almost certain that she had been awakened by tiny fingers tugging at her skirt or the sound of laughing childish voices coming from the next room. Nonsense of course. The result of a wobbly tummy, plus the excitement of moving into her new home.

Perhaps it would be better to get out more, join a literary appreciation group or something. After all she was now at that time of life when one wanted to be taken out of oneself—whatever that might mean—and it was most important not to pander to—well—fancies. She could remember one or two lukewarm friends who had gone distinctly funny after entering the fifties.

She joined the Ladies' Tuesday Afternoon Group, where the latest TV program (if it were decent), the prime minister's latest misdemeanor, the prospect of an atomic war and other worthwhile subjects were discussed. As Celia prided herself on being an outspoken person who was not afraid of expressing her opinion, she had soon dethroned the current chairperson and made herself extremely unpopular, which as everyone knows, is the seal of success.

Then she took to attending evening classes, organized by the local county council, where she became proficient in basket-making, early Victorian letter writing, pottery and raising a garden in window boxes.

All this activity kept her as active as anyone could wish—or in many cases would want—and succeeded in taking her out of herself in no uncertain manner. There was no time for morbid *fancies* and hence no danger of her going distinctly funny.

For a while at any rate.

Basket-making became a boring pastime, early Victorian letter writers revealed themselves to be nothing more than persons with a penchant for not using one word when ten would do; pottery was a messy business, and as she already had an extensive garden, raising one in window boxes was a waste of time. Moreover the Ladies' Tuesday Afternoon Group grew restless under her dictatorship, successfully organized a palace revolution, replaced her as chairperson by the wife of a coal merchant, which in effect meant she was sent into exile.

So it was that once again—as the time honored expression has it—time hung heavily on her hands, and she took to sitting in a comfortable armchair, trying to read a novel, which inevitably slipped from her hands, when she sank into a shallow sleep.

Almost every time she was awakened by tiny fingers tugging at her skirt, or the sound of laughing childish voices coming from the next room. But she could no longer say with hand on heart: "Nonsense of course."

Sometimes the tugging—the childish laughter took place when she was on the verge of awakening. She was in fact almost fully aware that four or five children were involved, possibly two by her knees and three in the next room. On occasion they made quite a clamor and it was this that rocketed her up from the pit of sleep, hurtled her into full awareness—then all sound and tugging stopped.

The phenomenon had an eerie effect, became more than a little disturbing and Celia again began to wonder if she was indeed becoming distinctly funny and if the house, after all, was going to suit her.

Then she began to see. Only a glimpse at first.

After a particularly noisy session, shrill laughter, stamping of feet, the slamming of a door, plus violent tugging, Celia cried out, opened her eyes, then fell back in her chair.

She had a glimpse of a tiny figure attired in a white dress disappearing round a door frame. A fleeting vision that might have been a vestige of a dream, or maybe an illusion created by the wakening brain (always supposing that organ ever sleeps), there were all manner of explanations, but when this last occurrence was matched up with the sounds, one's wondering invaded a new plane of conjecture.

A few days later she was permitted more than a glimpse. A good long look.

Sleeping again, but this time her her bed, with a bedside lamp sending a golden circle of light across the room, for the eerie, distinctly funny disturbances made total and even partial darkness unpleasant, to say the least. Lying on her left side, cheek nestled deeply in a plump pillow, her eyes sprang open, and she saw a child, a little girl, standing a few feet away, looking at her, attired in a white dress, with auburn hair groomed into tight ringlets, hanging down to her shoulders. Dark, limpid eyes gazed into her own and for a while it seemed as if time was frozen and Celia Watson would spend eternity staring at a child, while cold fear crept slowly up from her feet, like the soul-releasing chill that announces the approach of death.

Perhaps that good long look lasted two minutes—or five seconds—but it seemed as if time had stood still before the child vanished—ceased to be—became as never was.

But its image remained imprinted on Celia's brain, persisted in lurking behind her eyes, and when she closed the lids, there it was standing against a blazing red background.

Fearful to look upon, dreadful to consider—but—appealing.

When fear had unlocked its shackles, Celia leapt out of bed, ran out on to the landing and raced into the bathroom, this being a sure place

of refuge back in the innocent days of childhood, it being assumed that no one would dare invade its privacy once the engaged bolt had been slid into position. So far as she could remember experience had never disproved this theory.

Seated on the lavatory pan she gave the matter her full attention and came to the conclusion that she might have over-reacted to the situation, fearsome though the experience had been. Had not her late, extremely wise Papa always maintained: "There is always a rational explanation for every extraordinary experience if only we take the trouble to look for it."

Therefore it stood to reason there was a rational explanation for all these sounds and visions, be they ghosts . . .

Celia shuttered on the lavatory seat and regurgitated that horrible little word:

"Ghosts!"

Her old new house was haunted!

She had never thought about ghosts before, save on the occasion when she read *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James, and that did rather offer a rational explanation. The governess might have been distinctly funny. Had anyone asked her: "Do you believe in ghosts?" the answer undoubtedly would have been a head shaking "don't know," which might have been a cover up for: "Maybe I do."

Now, sitting on the lavatory pan, she most certainly did.

She must leave the newly acquired house at the very break of day and never come back. Get the nice estate agent to put it on the market, then buy a well appointed flat nearer town. That was what she must do.

Most certainly.

She shifted her behind into a more comfortable position and gave the matter some more thought.

"Why?"

Why give up this lovely new-old house, just because of some noisy ghost children?

After all, they only seemed to manifest when she was on the point of waking up and that surely could be borne. Repetition was already veneering the phenomenon with the gloss of familiarity, which in due course might well breed a kind of contempt.

Children? She should have had children if only their production had not necessitated a rather revolting physical function. Now she might acquire some without any effort on anyone's part: children that did not require feeding, clothing, cossetting, washing or any other beastly service.

Dream children. Ghostly waifs.



Celia rose from the lavatory pan, automatically pulled the chain, then bravely walked out of the bathroom. She crossed the landing and stood (for no particular reason) looking down over the banisters. She cleared her throat three times, before calling out in a sing-song voice:

“Come on . . . children. Come to Mummy. Come to Mummy.”

This language had always worked with a kitten she had once owned, but the ghost children seemed to be unimpressed. Not a sight or sound greeted eye or ear and presently Celia went back to bed, there surprisingly to fall into a deep sleep and not awake until the morning sun had turned the window into a golden square.

“Ghost children,” Miss Broadfield-Blythe said gently, tapping Celia’s knee with a pointed finger, “are the most harmless of wraiths. You see, my dear, they are seeking love.”

Celia refilled her guest’s cup and replaced a blue woollen cozy on the teapot.

“Is that so?”

“Indeed it is. No doubt during their brief lives they never experienced that precious emotion and are now spending eternity looking for it.”

“I’ve only seen one child,” Celia pointed out, “although I’ve heard others. I think there’s four or five.”

Miss Broadfield-Blythe closed and opened her watery blue eyes, then rubbed her long nose.

“Bound to be more than one, but not more than six I’d say. Never in my long experience have I known there to be more than six ghost-children in one group. When I received your most interesting letter, I said to Mildred—we’ve worked on many a case together—I said, Mildred, a mass juvenile haunting, but not more than six, I’ll be bound. Tell me, Miss Watson . . . It is Miss?”

Celia nodded.

“How sensible. Tell me, Miss Watson, how did you come to contact me? Did someone recommend me?”

“No, I saw your advertisement in the tobacconist’s window. As I’ve made no progress myself, I thought an expert might be more successful.”

Miss Broadfield-Blythe screwed up her face into an expression that might have denoted puzzlement and asked:

“Progress? Success? I’m not with you, dear. What kind of progress had you in mind?”

“Well, to bring the children out of hiding. I mean—I only hear or see them just before I wake up. Properly wake up, that is. I want to—well—make contact. See and hear them when wide-awake.”

“For what reason, dear? Not to experiment I hope. Our spirit friends are not at all happy when experimented with.”

Celia fluttered her hands. “No, indeed. I want . . . want . . . to sort of adopt them.”

A wonderful smile spread slowly over Miss Broadfield-Blythe’s face and for a while lent it a kind of beauty. “That’s simply gorgeous, dear. Simply heart-stopping.” She pulled forth an enormous handkerchief from a patch pocket. “Want to adopt poor, love-seeking spirit children! God bless you, my dear.” She patted her eyes several times, then resolutely put the handkerchief away. “But let’s get down to our muttons. What can I do to help you?”

Celia put on her little-I’m-lost-girl act, which had never been known to fail when dealing with masculine inclined middle-aged spinsters. “I rather hoped you’d be able to do something that will bring them out. Let me see and talk to them.”

The lady medium looked thoughtful. “I will do my best, dear. Can’t do more. No one can. I’ll see what can be done with the atmosphere. Sort of taste it.”

She pushed her tea cup to one side, laid her hands palms uppermost on the table, then closed her eyes. Presently she giggled. “One of them is tickling me. Right in the center of the right hand. How charming.” She called out in the same sing-song voice that Celia had used a few days before:

“Come to me, children dears. Come to your Auntie Ag, who you need not fear. Put your tweeny hands in mine and we’ll say hullo to your Mummy-to-be. Won’t that be nice? Yes, it will. Yes, it will.”

A loud crash came from above the stairs, which sounded as if the cut glass perfume container that resided on Celia’s dressing table, had been knocked—or thrown—on to the floor. But that was all.

Miss Broadfield-Blythe intoned other inducements, but for all the response they received, she might as well have saved her breath. Presently she released a gentle sigh and said:

“Well, I’m sure I’ve stirred them up. Brought them to the surface, so to speak. You’ll probably get results after I’m gone. Nothing startling at first. It takes time for this kind of thing to get really under way. But so far as I’m concerned there doesn’t seem to be much more I can do. Not for today at any rate.”

“I can’t thank you enough,” Celia replied. “If nothing else, you’ve put the entire business on a commonplace plane, which is truly remarkable. At least I won’t be frightened now, no matter what I see or hear.”

“Frightened! Why on earth should you be frightened? Those who have

passed over, have no wish to frighten us. No wish at all. Just one little point, dear. My fee is ten pounds."

For several days after Miss Broadfield-Blythe's visit, Celia saw and heard nothing, which was both a relief and a disappointment. A relief because she had by no means lost that inner dread which afflicts everyone who comes face to face with the unusual; disappointment, because she wanted to play the game of adopting dream children. One of those fantasies which it would be well if it never came to fulfillment.

Then one Sunday morning when the time erupting sound of church bells was disturbing the dust of long dead memories, a ripple of childish laughter came from the landing, followed by the thud of footsteps running down the stairs. Celia, who was about to open the front door, spun round, but there was nothing untoward to see. Nothing at all.

So she went out into the porch, double locked the front door behind her, then went to church—a weekly social event she always enjoyed.

The old church with its stained-glass windows and lingering aroma that was comprised of burnt candles, prayer books and damp, made her for some reason think of crumbling tombs and deep underground vaults, where the noble dead have slept for centuries. Then the sunlight was filtered through the stained-glass and did something wonderful to a young girl's hair, even while it revealed the gaunt face of an old man, and caused a shadow mask to form round his deep sunken eyes.

Choirboys' high-pitched treble voices sent a melody of sound up to the ancient rafters, before crashing open doors in Celia Watson's brain, and an impression of long-long ago childhoods came drifting out on multi-colored clouds, even as dust-motes drifted along light beams formed by sunlight and stained-glass.

The brain was quite unable to deal with this experience and closed down its awareness, so that Celia's next impression was that of shaking hands with the vicar who had hastened to the front porch for that purpose. She walked home in a not unpleasant bemused state, even though she knew—positively knew—something exciting was about to happen.

When she opened her front door, she could not be certain if three or four small shapes raced up the stairs and disappeared on the landing, but the brain suggested in an abstract sort of way that such may have been the case. She removed her hat and coat, went into the kitchen, there opened the gas oven door and inspected the fillet end of a leg of lamb, which had been sizzling gently on a low heat for two hours. Almost ready. The roast potatoes had also acquired a rich crisp brownness, and it only

remained for her to ignite the gas ring under a saucepan of garden peas, for Sunday lunch to be well on its way toward full preparation. She had long ago dispensed with apple pie and custard, which had been a permanent feature of childhood Sunday dinner, but those were the days when plumpness was considered to be a sign of good health.

She turned, reached out for a towel on which to wipe her hands—and saw them.

The little girl—the one she had seen before—and a slightly older boy dressed in a blue velvet suit—were standing in the kitchen doorway, watching her.

First the dread-chill which ran up from her feet and threatened to paralyze her heart; then the wonderment—the suggestion of joy—and the realization she was viewing two ghosts (hateful word) in full daylight, while wide-awake and at close quarters. And it was no use trying to quell the racing heart and rub sweaty hands on the skirt of her dress, for the blend of emotions was sending some kind of current down through her nerve grid and she was laughing and crying, both at the same time, and the two children continued to watch her, the hint of a smile on their angel faces.

With one hand she wiped tears from her streaming eyes and stretched out the other toward the two apparitions, half-hoping, half-dreading to make some kind of contact, but they continued to stare at her, the smile more pronounced, verging on derision. Then they started to drift away from her, back through the doorway, across the hall until the two shapes were nothing more than splodges of colored light on the far wall—the product of sunshine and glass.

Celia called out: “Come back . . . come back,” and as though in derisive reply, the sound of childish laughter came from above stairs.

She slept hardly at all that night, the habit of trying to look in every direction at once, which she had acquired during the daylight hours, became even more pronounced once the sun had set. To lie in bed with the lights full on, jerking the head from side to side, straining the ears to catch every sound, became nerve-racking to say the least, particularly when fear became stronger than the desire to acquire ghost-dream-children. To Celia it seemed nothing short of ridiculous that she should dread and desire. It was a state of being that surpassed being distinctly funny and verged on insanity.

Not until the sun sent its first infant shafts of light through the window curtains, did she relax on her sweat-moist pillows and slip into an uneasy sleep. When she awoke much later in the morning, she was in time to

see a small arm and shoulder disappear round the half open door and experienced the by now familiar feeling of pleasure blended with fear.

No further phenomenon manifested for the next few weeks, and such was Celia's anxiety, she often forgot to eat, wash or change her clothes. In consequence people—particularly those who did not like her—began making half-pitying, half-scornful remarks and generally conjecture why this lapse from pride-in-appearance had taken place. The vicar decided it was his duty to investigate.

“The place is in an awful mess,” Celia objected.

The vicar, a tall handsome man with thick white hair, gave her a most charming smile and said: “But I've come to see you, dear lady, not your house. Please, I have walked a long way this morning and really would appreciate a cup of coffee.”

This request—some might call it a command—for hospitality from a man of the cloth, could not be ignored, so Celia could do no less than stand to one side and allow the reverend gentleman to enter. He gave the living room a quick glance and had to agree the place was indeed in an awful mess, for apart from an accumulation of dust, screwed up balls of writing paper lay on the floor, table, chairs and mantelpiece; one half sheet which seemed to have unrolled itself, caught his eye and he managed to decipher the words scrawled with a black ball point pen: “COME TO ME CHI”

But if the room was in an awful mess, the woman could be aptly described as a wreck of her former self. Gray hair—strangely he could not remember seeing a single gray hair on her head before today—hung in rat-tails round and over a white-lined face; heavy blue pouches drooped under watery eyes, which seemed to be in danger of running down sunken cheeks. A slight but persistent tic quivered at the right of her mouth, while there was a distinct tremor of the right hand.

This she raised and waved in the direction of a deep armchair. “Seat yourself, vicar, and I'll fetch you a cup of coffee.”

The clergyman shook his head. “No, allow me to get you one. The kitchen is through there—” he in turn pointed to an open doorway—“as I remember. I used to visit this house in the days of Mrs. Fortescue.”

“Really, I could not possibly allow you to . . .”

“Nonsense. You are clearly unwell and I'm quite capable of waiting on myself and you. Now you seat yourself. I'll find everything.”

Celia did as she was bid, but watched the vicar disappear into the kitchen with great concern, and once called out: “It's in an awful mess . . . The coffee jar is on the shelf over the sink and there should be milk in the fridge . . .”

He returned after a lapse of ten minutes, carrying two mugs of steaming coffee and wearing an expression of deep anxiety.

"I found the coffee, but the milk in your refrigerator seems to have gone off, but fortunately I managed to unearth a tin of condensed. In fact your supply of fresh food seems to be—well—rather in the same state as the milk. Due no doubt to the sultry weather. But I do think someone should do something about clearing out—the debris—and restocking. I do really. But first drink this coffee. I did find some biscuits, but they were distinctly soggy."

"I'm so sorry, but I've been very busy lately, I've rather let things go . . ."

The vicar seated himself on the edge of the chair, and took a tentative sip from his mug of coffee. "Please, no apologies are necessary. My job is to help and understand. Miss Watson—Celia—you are without doubt sorely troubled. Trouble shared is trouble halved. Please allow me to halve your trouble, then possibly discard the remainder."

This rather puzzling offer was accompanied by such a charming smile, Celia for the first time in a long while dared to hope that a male might have the necessary acumen to give sound advice and even understand what must be an unique situation. But still she hesitated.

"I'm not sure, Mr. . . ."

"Rodney, Celia. Please."

"Yes, well, yes, Mr. . . . Rodney. I mean I'm not sure if you'll fully understand my problem. You see . . ."

"Yes, Celia?"

"The fact is this house is . . . well . . ."

"Rather lonely for one person?"

"No, far from it. No . . . it is haunted by the ghosts of at least five children."

The Reverend Rodney emptied his coffee cup and placed it gently on a nearby low table, then took one of Celia's hands in his.

"Dear Celia, let us take one point at a time. Firstly we know that ghosts—as such—do not exist. When the body dies the soul goes straight to Heaven, or—sadly—straight to the place of atonement. There can be no lingering."

Normally Celia would have accepted this dogma from a man of the cloth as literal truth, but now, having some first-hand evidence of ghosts, she was inclined to question the reverend gentleman's logic.

"But Mr. . . . Rodney, cannot some souls, such as children's souls, be not quite ready for such an extreme—grand place as Heaven—the other

place being out of the question—and prefer to—well—stay where they were in life. Right here. It makes sense to me.”

“What makes sense to us, Celia, need not make sense to the Almighty. This is the plane of sin and flesh. I need hardly point out how the two go together. Above is the world of light. Below the world of darkness. There are no age groups in eternity.”

Celia took a deep breath and released a flow of words that revealed the truth as she saw it.

“But I have seen and heard the ghosts—disembodied souls of children. Here in this house—this room. First as dream figures—then as clearly as I see and hear you. And they need love. And I have so much to give, having sort of saved it up over the years. Please don’t lie and tell me they don’t exist.”

The Reverend Rodney assumed a very grave expression and clearly thought deeply before answering. Then he cleared his throat and after regaining possession of Celia’s right hand (which she displayed signs of wanting to withdraw), said in his deep attractive voice:

“Dear Celia, I am not going to dismiss what you have told me as the result of a fevered, even neurotic, imagination, brought about by loneliness and frustration—for I have heard stories about this house, which up to this time I never credited as being other than complete moonshine. But now . . .”

He paused for a while, then went on. “So far as I can gather this house—a long while ago—was inhabited by a couple called Ferguson—Jacob and Sarah Ferguson. And they did have five children—four boys and a girl. That must be admitted. There were five children. All ranging from five to thirteen years. The parents practiced what they and some of their contemporaries called the old religion. In other words the black arts, devil worship—witchcraft. The children were corrupted from birth and in time—for young minds are malleable—became even more evil than their parents. No one knows how the end came about, but it is assumed that the children killed their mother, then the father massacred them, before committing suicide himself. But there is one school of opinion that maintains it was the other way around. The children killed both parents, then themselves by some secret ritual, which ensured their souls would be withheld from torment and confined to the walls of this house. This I must disbelieve, but in view of your experience I am inclined to believe some personality residue, or manifestation of past evil, still lingers here. There can be no doubt you must leave this house at once. Leave it and never come back. It seems possible you have the kind of

mind that can pick up impressions, time debris . . . I don't know. But you must leave this house."

Celia gazed upon the vicar with mounting anger, all her mistrust of the opposite sex revived. When he had finished speaking and given her hand a final squeeze, she remained silent for some little while, before saying in a carefully controlled voice:

"First of all, vicar, I do not believe a single word of that horrid story. If there is a basic truth in it, then the wicked parents left the poor little things to die of ill-treatment, and now their innocent souls are demanding—demanding, do you hear?—the love and protection that was never theirs in life. I intend to remain here and provide that love and protection."

"Celia . . ."

"My name is Miss Watson."

"Celia, you are dreadfully mistaken. This house is bad for you. Believe me. I am convinced that is the truth. A hundred other people might be able to live here undisturbed. But not you. Come to the vicarage until . . ."

"I would be obliged if you would leave now."

"You must allow me to convince you . . ."

"I do not wish to be rude. Please leave now. And do not come back."

He conjured up a very wry smile. "I do hope I'm wrong and sincerely apologize if I have needlessly upset you. I should not have told you that ridiculous story, but if you can see and hear . . ."

"Shut the door behind you as you go out."

"I hate . . . simply hate . . ."

"Pull the door sharply to or the Yale lock will not engage. I believe the wood is warped."

The slam of the front door was a prelude to an unnatural silence and the ensuing loneliness (a state she had never known before) possibly the reason for the sudden fit of crying. Her shoulders shook, tears poured down her cheeks, and it seemed as if the grief of a lifetime had suddenly found an outlet and was now smashing down all the carefully erected barricades of indifference.

But the fit passed, she wiped her eyes, gulped back one last sob and went into the sitting-room.

All five ghost children were waiting for her. The tallest one—blond hair, bright eyes, dressed in a green suit—standing by the window: the next—not so tall, auburn hair, dark eyes, in a long brown coat—to the left of the doorway. The little boy and girl she had seen before—to the left of the doorway: and another boy, of medium height, dressed in black,



a long robe affair, his black eyes glittering in a rather alarming fashion if one looked at them too long. His black hair hung down to his shoulders.

Not one moved. Not so much as a blink or the merest movement of a finger. Motionless effigies. Three dimension shadows of what had been. Images recreated from personality debris by her brain and projected by her eyes. Maybe the vicar had instinctively pinpointed the truth of the matter, but she could not believe these five shades had anything evil in their make-up. That must be impossible.

Now to give them life and make them her own.

She called softly: "Come, children. There's nothing to fear in this house now. I will be a mother to you all. Take from me the essence you need to live again. To be always with me, awake or asleep. So I can hear your voices, your footsteps—if possible feel your hands touching me."

The little boy and girl (they might have been twins) were the first to move. They glided to her and came to rest some two feet away, heads tilted, eyes looking up into hers. But she could not detect a glimmer of intelligence. Merely the glitter that might be reflected in the eyes of some animal. Then the tallest came to her and stood behind the twins (if such they were) and looked into her eyes (or so it seemed). Then came the lad in brown who took up a position to her right; finally the one in black—all save the dead white face.

Now what to do with them?

She turned and after saying: "Follow me, children," led the way into the kitchen. At least such was her intention, but when she looked back they had not moved. All stood in the same positions, staring at the spot she had just vacated, motionless again, and she giggled.

"Silly me. They will not be hungry. Food and kitchens mean nothing to them. It is love they need."

She went back to them and bending down whispered the wonderful message. "Children, I want you to know you are mine—I am yours from now on. Do you understand? We now belong to each other. Your loneliness is over. So is mine."

The boy in black moved slightly. His eyes gleamed like sparks floating in the dark.

"Can no one—not a single one of you, give me some sign that you understand?" Celia pleaded. "Don't let that awful clergyman be right. Please."

They all vanished. Were switched off. Were no more.

Celia spent the rest of the day looking for them.

The bed had come with the house and was very wide. Celia had always

slept in a three foot bed, never having had occasion to require anything larger. This might have been the reason she slept on the left side of this giant and never parted upper from lower sheet on the right. Despite—or maybe because of—the experience of that day, she slept soundly all night; sank into a deep coma of unawareness that drugged every sense, save for the one which has never been explained.

Then she awoke and lay quite still, knowing the unexpected had happened, but unwilling at that moment to open her eyes and discover what shape it had taken.

The senses returned to seventy-five percent normality, the brain expelled the fog of sleep, but still Celia kept her eyes tight closed, conjecture creating mental pictures that were without understanding.

Then hearing recorded a sound. Low childish laughter. Not far off, but near—in this room—by—or on—her bed.

The demand to know would not be denied. Celia opened her eyes.

The window curtains were drawn apart and the room was flooded with silver moonlight and revealed their slender forms in every detail. All five children were seated on her bed. The two small ones, the twins, on the spare pillows, the tall boy and he in brown way down at the foot and he in black lying on his stomach, his head turned in her direction, the black eyes now glittering with an alien intelligence.

Joy came shuffling on reluctant feet, for had they not come to her, sought her out of their own accord, and surely it was not their fault they had so white faces, or that the lad in black should have rather frightening eyes.

They had that death-beauty that rightfully belongs to some vivid nightmare that has long been forgotten by the active mind, but still can be recalled by the subconscious at that moment which separated sleep from awakening. Celia thought briefly of sleeping castles where mist formed strange shapes in ruined corridors.

She tried to sit up, but for some reason her body refused to obey the dictates of her brain, although she was permitted to turn her head from side to side, but that was hardly an asset, for some of the joy seeped away every time she met the glittering-eyed gaze of the lad in black.

Then a giggle came from one or maybe all of them; a deep-throated inane giggle that had the suggestion of a squeal, and undiluted fear slid into her mind and she became as one who has encouraged the presence of half-grown tigers. Instinct warned body and mind and she succeeded in sitting up, but as freedom of movement returned to her, so, it would seem, it did to them. They all drifted off the bed and blanket and sheets went with them. Then the squealing inane giggle blending with the

tearing of her nightdress, and they moved, danced, round the bed, while she called out in fear-joy ecstasy:

“No, children, you must not be so naughty. Please . . . please you’ll hurt Mummy.”

The giggling became louder, the five moved faster until they became a whirling mass of colored mist; a scratch appeared on Celia’s right shoulder and seeped a thin trail of blood down her back. Her hair stood on end and she screamed when it was tugged abruptly. Invisible fingers poked at her naked flesh, pinched and punched, while a roaring darkness threatened to engulf her. Then all movement ceased and she was left trembling on the bed, as the dreadful five congregated in the doorway. All had dead white faces now and every one giggled, ejected the inane squealing sound from between lax lips.

Celia raised herself up on to her elbows and managed to speak reproachfully with a sob-racked voice.

“You naughty-naughty children. You’ve hurt and frightened Mummy who only wanted to love you.”

The giggling took on a higher-pitched tone and the five turned and fled over the landing and running footsteps could be hard descending the stairs.

Then for a while silence—and loneliness.

For two days Celia dismissed the minor destruction as nothing more than infantile mischief with no sinister intent. All glass jars and bottles were smashed, the refrigerator door refused to stay shut, then ceased to function. “They don’t understand,” she told the empty house. “If they had been reared in a loving atmosphere, they wouldn’t be like this. Never mind, patience and endurance will work the miracle. It must.”

But on the morning of the third day, when she distinctly saw the lad in black dart from under her right elbow and deliberately upset the frying pan in which she was cooking some sausages, thus causing a roaring flame to soar up toward the ceiling and all but set her hair alight, then she very reluctantly accepted that the children were not just mischievous, but had at least some evil propensities.

But it made not the slightest difference.

Beauty can hide any number of imperfections and love can explain away any number of crimes. In an odd sort of way it was rather exciting having to keep one’s wits alert as to what trap they had set overnight. The footstool placed at the very top of the stairs, the bare patch on electric wiring, the turned on gas taps that just needed a lighted match to send her hurtling into eternity. Probably join them in that dimension they

inhabited. So far as was possible she experienced surprise at their ingenuity which resulted in the topmost cellar step being transformed into a death hazard by means of spirit of salts (transported from the loo) poured on the wooden supports. Had not her nose transmitted a warning, the undermined tread would have collapsed under her right foot.

"Artful monkeys," she murmured, after successfully smothering the blast of terror that threatened to destroy beyond repair the bastion of sanity. "I wonder what they'll think of next?"

If they were capable of thought, there was little for them to think of, for from then on Celia rarely left a chair she had dragged into the hall, this being the place "her family" were most likely to materialize. She smiled indulgently when the twins removed her shoes and flung them across the room and laughed softly when the Reverend Rodney climbed in through the sitting-room window, then somehow finished up on the topmost cellar step. After the initial scream, he never bothered her again.

"I should have had children," she announced again and again. "I should have considered the possibility of having children, long ago. They are such a comfort."

In fact they gave her more than comfort. More likely satisfaction, fulfillment, a most gratifying understanding that she had not lived her solitary life in vain. For the children grew fatter, particularly the lad in black who became positively bloated. They never acquired the slightest hint of color, for all their faces retained that rather disconcerting dead-white complexion, but Celia was certain it was a healthy pallor.

For herself—well—occasionally, she became aware of her own alarming thinness, the fact that her hands were well nigh transparent and she lacked the strength to do more than stir in her chair. But presently she took little interest in such mundane matters, for the antics of her family demanded all of her time. How they ran up and down stairs, in and out of those rooms she could see from her position in the hall, chasing each other, stopping now and again to plant a burning kiss on bare flesh, a reward out of all proportion to any slight discomfort she might suffer.

And they squealed with joyful excitement. Yes, really squealed with unrestrained joy. And Celia expressed her joy with some such sound, for had she not at last managed to create a happy family?

They came in through the sitting-room window, the one the Reverend Rodney had inadvertently left open. Tall burly men in blue uniforms, followed by a more slender one in a neat gray suit.

He was the only one to be actually sick. One of the others exclaimed: "Oh, my God!" but generally speaking they were all fairly immune

against being upset by the extremely unpleasant. Two made their way to the cellar steps, only to return a few minutes later, when the one with three white chevrons on his right arm, stated briefly:

“The missing parson isn’t missing any more. At the bottom of the steps, what’s left of him. Oh, my Gawd! Look at them!”

Shouts that expressed horror, disgust and downright loathing, followed five bloated rats as they raced up the stairs.

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